



MAFIE
TRIALS

BRUTAL BOYS OF THE MAFIE

T.R. OLDIN



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Content Note

I wish I didn't have to say this every time, but I'm going to. If you're family, stop. Stop right here, turn around, and forget this book exists. IF you keep going you are required to keep your mouth shut about this books contents at ANY and ALL family gatherings from this moment forward. You have been warned.

Now that that's over, for my readers. Listen, this book is dark. It is depraved and full of violence, blood, gore, and so much sex it should be illegal. If you're under the age of 18, this isn't for you. This book also contains themes of parental abuse, child abuse, authoritative abuse and medical abuse. Please know your limits.

I have done extensive research and even hired on a licensed therapist to help me write in legitimate coping mechanisms for trauma, but this is not a guide. I avidly encourage everyone to seek therapy if they are struggling. That being said, this book talks a lot about the two sides of therapy and it may be triggering for some readers. You will see the bad therapists who use outdated practice and fear to force you to change. Then you will see the good side, where therapists meet you where you are at and help you on a healthy journey to loving and accepting yourself. This is not a self help guide, but I hope it helps you learn to advocate for yourself should anyone ever try to silence you or your feelings.

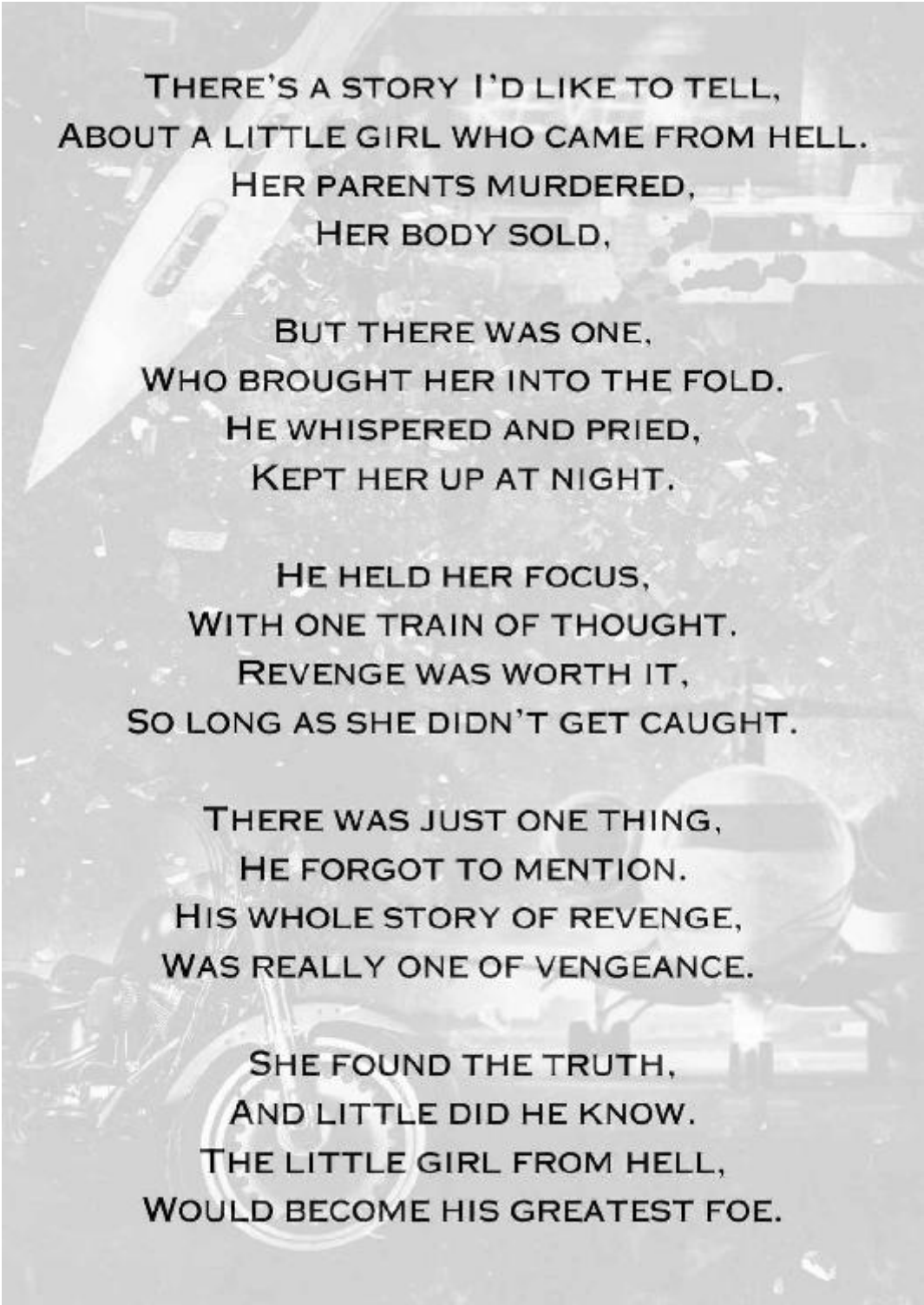
Now, for the final part, the sex. Yall, this book is filthy. It contains MANY scenes of BDSM play. This is not an instructional guide though. Any and all BDSM and kink exploration you do should always come with a lot of research and CONSENT. As a writer, I like to toe that line. In real life, don't do that. This is a safe space to express desires and not a guide for how to explore kink or BDSM. This being said, there

are scenes of MF, MM, MFM, MMF, and MMFM. Know your limits.

There may be other triggers I could have forgotten to mention. Just know that this book is dark and if you're concerned, it's okay to not move forward. This is book 2 in the Brutal Boys of the Mafie series. It is a why choose dark mafia romance and the series must be read in order.

For all of us who love hard, hurt deep, and think way too much.

I hope these characters inspire you to be wholly you.



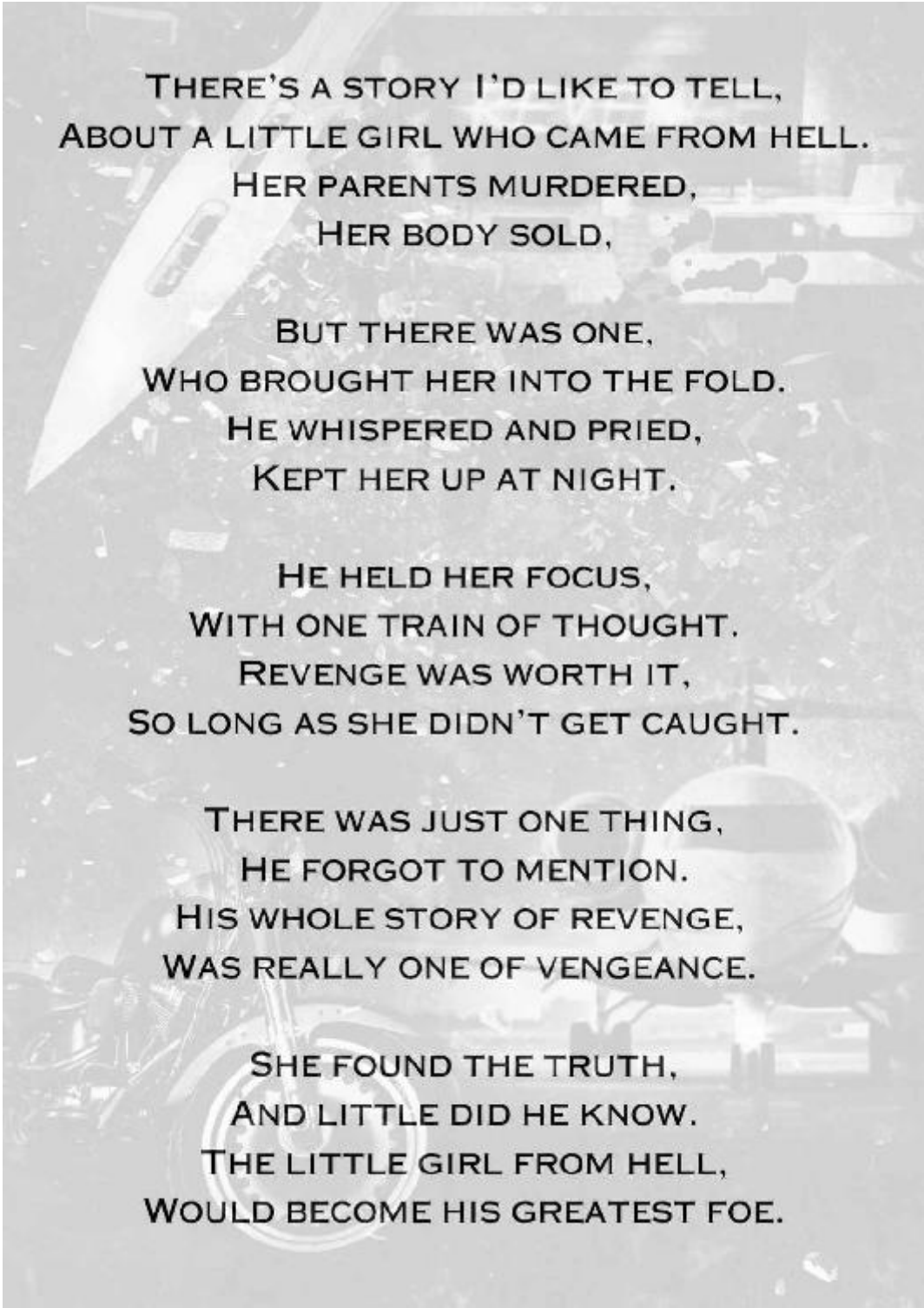
THERE'S A STORY I'D LIKE TO TELL,
ABOUT A LITTLE GIRL WHO CAME FROM HELL.
HER PARENTS MURDERED,
HER BODY SOLD,

BUT THERE WAS ONE,
WHO BROUGHT HER INTO THE FOLD.
HE WHISPERED AND PRIED,
KEPT HER UP AT NIGHT.

HE HELD HER FOCUS,
WITH ONE TRAIN OF THOUGHT.
REVENGE WAS WORTH IT,
SO LONG AS SHE DIDN'T GET CAUGHT.

THERE WAS JUST ONE THING,
HE FORGOT TO MENTION.
HIS WHOLE STORY OF REVENGE,
WAS REALLY ONE OF VENGEANCE.

SHE FOUND THE TRUTH,
AND LITTLE DID HE KNOW.
THE LITTLE GIRL FROM HELL,
WOULD BECOME HIS GREATEST FOE.



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Prologue

11 years old

11 years ago

We're sleeping in the safe room tonight. My father has been paranoid recently and this was the only thing that could make him feel better. We already have six guards on the property, but today he seemed particularly on edge.

The room has three comfortable cots and my parents' are pushed close together. I would never tell them this, but I like it when we stay here. Mama always makes us hot chocolates in the small kitchenette, and then she and Father would tell stories of how they met and what life was like when they were younger. I sleep the best in this small room where we are tucked in safely.

Father built the safe room himself, not wanting to let anyone else know that, behind the entertainment room in the basement, a hidden six-inch steel door leads to a fully stocked bunker with enough food and supplies to live in for a week.

I don't know exactly what it is my parents do, but they seem to be very good at it—even if it does involve certain risks they refuse to tell me about.

Father turns the monitors on the back wall off so we can go to sleep for the night, then comes over and tucks me in and kisses me on the forehead, like he does every night. Mama kisses me next before they make their way to their cots. I find myself trying not to move so that the covers stay around me just like my father put them. It makes me feel safe, like I'm wrapped in a cocoon where nothing can get me.

When I would get nightmares a few years back, my father would always come to me. He never made me feel bad or childish for having fears. Instead, he tried to teach me that it was okay to be afraid, so long as I didn't let the fear control me.

He started helping me train with a knife when I was nine, so I always felt like I could protect myself. He even got me a special sheath for it so I could keep it under my pillow while I slept.

Mama starts shivering and asks Father if he brought the extra blankets down. He says he forgot but will run to grab them and be right back. As he leaves through the door into the entertainment room, it seals shut behind him. I look over to Mama with a question on my mind.

“Do you think father is right to be afraid?” I ask her.

My mama won't lie to me, but she has always asked me to think hard about my questions and make sure I was really ready to accept the truth of the answers. My mother has always made a point for me to be aware of my emotions and learn to deal with them and process them. Many of her friends assume I'm much older than eleven because of this. I'm not just asking her because I want her to comfort me and lie, I'm asking because I want to know and I've genuinely thought

about how to process that answer. If we aren't safe, if I need to be more aware of my surroundings and keep an observant eye on things, then I think that's important for me to know.

The look on my mama's face is answer enough though. Something is wrong.

"I think your father will do everything he can to keep his little Lucky Charm safe," she says, purposefully cryptic.

I'm about to tell her that's not a real answer, and ask her to tell me what's going on, when a shot rings throughout the house. Mama jerks up off the cot and runs to the desk. She quickly turns on the monitors and all of the breath leaves her lungs. A man is standing in the living room with a gun pointed at my father. The audio isn't registering, but Mama knows this man. I can see it in her eyes.

"Why now?" she mumbles under her breath.

She looks at me with wide eyes and bends down to grab me by the shoulders.

"I need you to listen, Baby. I'm going to go out there, and I'm not going to come back. I want you to stay here until everyone is gone. You do not leave this room until then, no matter what you see or hear. Do you understand?"

I begin to shake and tears fall down my face. She wraps me into her arms and holds me tighter than she ever has before.

"The greatest surprise of my life was realizing how much I love you," she whispers into my ear. I can hear heavy footfalls coming down the stairs as she releases me and runs out of the safe room to shut the door behind her. She blows me a kiss as a single tear escapes from her eye, and then the door seals. My heart thrums with anxiety.

Why did that feel like goodbye?

I dash to my cot as fast as I can to grab my blade from under the pillow. I return to the monitors and unsheathe it, cradling the cool steel against my skin. Even though I know no one can get in here, it brings me comfort to know I have a weapon. Holding the blade makes me feel as though my father is right here with me.

If Mama's not coming back, then I'm determined to find out who's doing this and why. Frantically, I search for the knob on the right of the screens to turn on the audio. After that, I hit the record button to back up the video to the flash drive on the side as well as the main hard drive. When Father installed everything, he made sure I could work all of the pieces, just in case anything were to ever happen and I was alone.

The audio comes on and a man with a Russian accent speaks directly to my father as my mother is pulled into the room by her hair. She doesn't scream or fight. She just gives my father a nod and he smiles at her.

"Things will go best for you and your wife if you give me the girl. This was always going to happen, Damir."

My father spits at the man's feet and the man sneers back at him. "You will regret that. I will burn this house to the *fucking* ground, she belongs to the Pakhan!"

Thank goodness my father had the foresight to build this room in soundproof steel with a separate ventilation shaft to prevent smoke from entering in the case of a fire or tear gas being thrown at the house. I really should make a mental note to ask more about why we have this safe room.

My father laughs in the man's face. "Boris and I have a new deal. Why would he do this now?"

The man looks my father in the eyes and smiles wickedly. "He might have had a new deal, but until it's signed the old one still applies, and it's time for you to pay up."

My father's face scrunches up as realization seems to hit him.

What does he mean?

He shakes his head and goes to speak when a bullet to the head silences him.

His eyes don't close as his body jolts in surprise. It takes my brain a minute to understand what's happening. Then he falls, his muscular arms that used to spin me in circles until I was dizzy drops like they are no longer capable of holding his

weight. His bright blue eyes seem to turn gray on the screen in front of me as he lies on the ground, blood pooling around his head.

I look at the screen in horror, every memory of playing games and learning to dance, every laugh and sweet moment becomes tainted with the stream of crimson soiling the floor of my childhood home.

My stomach turns, and I feel like I'm going to faint. I move back to vomit all over the floor in front of me. My chest heaves and I struggle to pull in a breath. It's like my lungs no longer want to breathe with just the thought that the man who gave me life is no longer living in this world.

I try to steady my breathing, just like my father taught me. When I look up, I see the same man who killed my father now looking at Mama. She doesn't look afraid, or even bothered by his presence, and I know she knows I'm watching.

"Where is the girl, Liv? Tell me and I can make sure you see her again," he says looking at her like she's something to be devoured. I internally cringe as I realize just how much worse this night can get.

"We both know that's a lie," she says calmly. "Even *if* someone of your power could manage to pull that off, it would not be a life I would want to live."

The man's fists clench and I can see he is holding himself back, but I don't understand why.

He draws his gun, pointing it at her, and asks, "Any last words you want me to deliver to your daughter when I find her?"

My mother's face goes pale, the only reaction she gives him at all. Then she looks right at the cameras, right at me and her face softens.

"Never be afraid of the dark baby girl. Darkness can be a friend to those who learn to harness its power." She smiles and looks the man right in the eyes as her final words pass through her lips. "I'm quite confident you will never find her. But

don't worry, maybe one day you'll be worth something more than an errand boy."

He sneers at her, anger contorting his face before he leans back and spits in her face. She hardly flinches, only to close her eyes to keep the vile venom out. Slowly and gracefully, she wipes a hand over it and smiles back at him.

"You never could control your anger, it will be the death of you."

"At least I'll be the death of you." The man pulls the trigger just as he finishes the sentence, and I watch as my mother's lifeless body falls to the ground right next to my father's.

The sound echoes through my skull, lighting a fire in its path. I fall to the ground and scream. I scream until my voice no longer works. I scream until the tears are gone. I scream until there's nothing left.

My body shakes and the tears no longer come to my eyes, no matter how much I beg for them to pull out the pain. But they refuse and I'm forced to feel every moment my heart breaks as I endure this process of grief. Over the next eleven years, I'm forced to endure a roller coaster of emotions while my control is slowly stripped away from me.

Denial hits me first like the force of a hurricane. I convince myself this is all just a dream, that any moment now, I'll wake up wrapped tightly in my little cocoon, inside our safe room, with my parents asleep in their cots.

When that doesn't happen, and instead I wake up every day now under my uncle's care, the ache in my stomach refuses to dull. Instead of lying around and denying reality, I'm forced to move on and live in a world where pieces of me are broken beyond repair and will never be whole again.

Anger washes over me like a tsunami, pumping fury through my limbs, leaving nothing but a fire in my soul as I begin to train with my uncle. I stand up and slam my fists into everyone and everything I can, relishing in the burn as my skin busts around my knuckles. When the fire is gone, leaving nothing but ash in its wake, I decide to set my sights on my

real enemy. I put all of the good memories aside, closing them up in a tiny box in the back of my mind so no one can touch them. So that no one can use them to make me feel as helpless and as useless as I do now. I won't let myself be weak ever again.

Bargaining with the devil and all the demons that do his bidding is something I thought only happened in movies. But over time, I beg, knowing no god could come to save me if this is what happens to children in his world. I offer my soul as a sacrifice in exchange for them to be back at my side as I lay in this prison camp and begin to accept my fate. When the king of hell ignores my cries and turns his back to me, I fall into myself again and wrap up all of these thoughts and ideas of them ever coming back to me and giving me no choice but to move on.

Depression clouds my mind as I lay there feeling numb and hopeless after my uncle found me. I let the evil it brings eat away at every part of me, morphing me into someone darker, something monstrous. I beg it to just take me so the pain will subside. When it doesn't listen, I work against it. I wrap the darkness around my heart until it's as if we are standing side by side like old childhood friends. I mix it into my mind, forcing me to be stronger. I use it all to fuel the monster buried deep inside me until it obeys and comes to sit right at the surface. I take a deep breath in, acknowledging and allowing all the hate and hurt I feel in my heart to have its moment. When I exhale, I release it all in order to move on to the next phase of my grief.

I command my brain to accept that there are people in this world capable of making someone an orphan. Capable of killing their parents in cold blood in their childhood home. I make myself realize that evil exists and it's surrounded me every single day of my life, I was just too blind to see it. Evil lives in the blackened hearts of these murderous monsters and I believe that, in order to ever feel safe again, I will have to become one of them. Then, and only then, can I move on to the final stage.

This is the stage psychologists won't talk to you about because it's not pretty. It's the stage that ignites a fire in the darkness that I now control. The stage that won't bring them back, but will eventually help me move on.

Revenge.



Chapter 1

“They were found dead in their home. Bullet to the head. Execution style,” my secretary reports to me.

Panic like I’ve never known before grips me. “Where is their daughter? Where is Eydis? Is she hurt?” I have loved that girl like she was my own since the moment she was born. I was one of the first people to hold her other than her parents, and the thought of her dealing with this alone or being hurt makes me physically ill.

“She was nowhere to be found.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I yell, tossing shit off my desk like it’s not important to the foundation of my organization.

My secretary huffs, used to my outbursts when shit goes south, but this is worse than people not being on time or things not being organized. This is a little girl's life. She bends down to pick up the papers I'll need for my meeting in fifteen minutes and neatly places them back together as she speaks.

"I will send a team to search for her but no one has been able to find her. It's like she just disappeared."

She didn't though. The daughter of the second most wealthy family in all of Russia doesn't just disappear unless there's a reason. Someone took her. And I will use every resource I have at my disposal to find her.

"Cancel my meeting, nothing is happening until Eydis is here and safe with me," I say as I walk to the small bathroom attached to my office. I've been thinking about adding a room here so I can properly change and be on the ready as needed but things have been too busy at home lately.

I change out of my suit and into some comfortable gear to track down whoever it is that killed my closest friend. I send a prayer up, hoping for guidance to find my future daughter-in-law.

What started as an arranged marriage, became so much more as Damir and my friendship grew. I loved him like a brother for the past twelve years, and he has always had my back. Our families might not be as close but I had always hoped that once we both settled into our roles our children would grow up knowing and loving each other.

I made him a promise when she was born. I swore to protect her with all that I am should anything ever happen to him, and I keep my promises.

I exit the bathroom to find my secretary standing there with my keys in hand.

"The jet is ready, but you need to hurry. It's been eight hours since they were killed, she could be anywhere by now."

As the memory of the second worst day of my life fades, I look at my son holding Eydis in his arms. He and I haven't been close in a while, and while I know that's my fault, my

mind still struggles to push past looking into his eyes. Every time I look at him, it's like I see his mother. Her loss pains me, but seeing my son's heartache over a girl I was supposed to protect, almost makes it hurt worse.

I didn't just fail her, I failed him, again.

"Do you love her?" I ask him as he gently brushes Eydis' hair. His movements stop for a moment before continuing.

He doesn't look at me, his eyes are solely focused on every movement from the girl in his arms. "I didn't think I'd ever love anyone again knowing that I can't protect them from the world." He looks at me with sad eyes and I know that choosing her for him was the right decision. "But this one snuck up on me, and I don't think I'll ever be able to let her go. I don't just love her. That's too simple. I want to give her everything, the whole world if she asks for it. I would rip my heart right out of my chest for her. So, yes I love her, and nothing you say could make me let her go."

"I don't want you to let her go. I want you to marry her."

Alexi's face goes pale and his movements freeze. Ever since we lost his mother, marriage is the one thing he swore to me was off the table. I agreed because I believed Eydis was dead or that I would never find her. Now, things have changed.

"What? Why?" he asks in shock.

"The reason I've been looking for her for all these years is because before she was born, her father promised her to marry into my family. I chose her for you."

I can see the anger rising on his face. "Why didn't you tell me this?"

"Because I thought she was gone and you insisted on never taking a wife. However, it's clear to me now that you have changed your mind. And I would make a decision quickly. It seems you're not the only interested party."

When I saw Lev and Damien's pictures with her, I was furious. She is supposed to be for my son, not them.

"What do you mean?" he questions.

“I mean your so-called brothers have been trying to claim her as well. She was never for them, she was just for you.”

“Get out,” he seethes, his mood going from bothered to downright furious in an instant.

“What?” I understand him being upset that I didn’t tell him, but he already chose her. I don’t get why he’s angry.

“I control my rage with you often, Father. But with this topic, I will not be able to keep my voice down or stop myself from likely throwing you across the room, and I don’t want to hurt her by jumping up to show you who I am. So, respectfully, get the fuck out. Right now, all that matters is Evie. Until she wakes up and explains this all to us, I don’t want you here.”

“But son,” I start, and he raises his gun at me. Never did I think a girl would be the final straw that made him turn against me, but I’m honestly proud to see the lengths he will go to in order to defend her. She deserves someone like that. He’s already learning to be better than me.

“Alright, I’ll leave,” I concede, putting my hands up as I stand, “but I’m not going far. Call me when you’re ready to talk.”

My son doesn’t respond, he just keeps his gun aimed at me until I have the door fully closed.

“You know,” Lev says, startling me from behind, “I get where this could be weird for someone like you. Sharing someone. Loving someone more than yourself, enough to make them happy no matter the sacrifice.”

His eyes are red and his white hair is disheveled. I’ve never really spoken to Lev outside of meetings and he’s always been the quiet one. But his father told me things were changing him here, and I have a strong feeling that *thing* is Eydis.

“Listen here,” I begin, but apparently these boys have all grown a death wish of a backbone.

“I think I’m done listening to you old man,” he says with venom lacing his tone. “Listening to you has gotten me nowhere in this life. You may lead us, but you don’t protect us.”

That's why you don't have a relationship with your son. When your organization becomes more important than your family, then you've failed. We won't make that same mistake."

He turns to walk away from me as I absorb his words. It's hardly been six months and these boys have truly changed into men.

"How are you going to avoid it?" I ask him, curious about his plan to manage a multi-trillion dollar organization while having a very odd family dynamic. I don't raise my voice at him, knowing his father Ivan, the poor kid has been yelled at enough in his life. I think maybe it's time I started to listen.

"We plan to make our family our organization. Whatever that may look like. That way, if we feel the need to build a home at the office, then we still all end the day together. We plan to work as a team, keeping everyone in the know so that no surprises can happen."

"You think you can keep everyone safe by working with them? We are criminals. Inviting your family to work at your side is a death sentence for them." I think back to my wife. Innocent, pure. There's no way she wanted to join forces with me in the underworld.

"I think we work better as a team, we stay more focused. At least if we die doing what we all love, we die together." He takes a step back to leave but turns to me one final time. "If the people in my life can't handle this, then they aren't the people for me."

"Oh yeah, how's your girl doing in there, Lev?" I snap at him. I know it's childish, but he's acting like he's better than me and it's really starting to get on my nerves.

"She's alive," he says with a shrug. "How's your girl, *Pakhan*?"



Chapter 2

As I escort Havoc to the shed, followed way too closely by Arrow, I find myself stealing glances at him.

Only once did Evie open up to me about her past, but Havoc was the one who saved her, and I believe he came here to save her again.

I love the power I hold over him at this moment, him bound and my kitty-ear-shaped weapon digging into his side. He fights my hold, but I know how I wrapped his hands.

When tape is applied to certain pressure points and they are held tight, it makes the rest of your arms weaker. He's a built guy and is likely pissed he can't break out of this hold. Making his thumb protrude outward causes him to be unable to tug in a way that would rip the tape. I find a smile creeping onto my

face as I watch him struggle with the understanding of what's going on.

"Fighting is only going to make it worse," I warn him. Unsure why I don't want all of this to be quite as hard on him as Alexi probably does. He tried to get here in time and told the truth. Which is more than I can say I did.

"Fighting is all I know. If I stop fighting, then I'm as good as dead," he says, his brows creasing in concentration.

Arrow chimes in with his lovely, unwanted, advice. "Stop talking to him. He's a prisoner here. Not a buddy. Take him to the shed and hand him over. Anything in the middle is only grounds to get distracted and creates a possibility for your target to get away."

His jaw ticks in annoyance. I roll my eyes. While he and I have spent a lot of time together after the library closes, I've made it very clear I'm not his. And even clearer that he does not get to tell me what to do. He always likes to try though.

"I don't answer to you, or have you forgotten that? If I want to talk, I'll talk."

I'm half tempted to let this Havoc guy go just so I can shove my pointy-eared weapon into Arrow's chest after the look he gives me.

"You can cut the attitude with me," he says with sarcasm. "It only makes me want to tell you what to do more."

Tingles erupt down my spine, and I hate how close he is right now. It's like he doesn't trust that I can handle this guy when I'm the one who caught him in the first place. Arrow and I might spend time together as friends, but that doesn't make this any more than two people just hanging out. Even if I do want to hang out with him in my bed, between my legs.

Nope. No. We are not getting distracted right now. The only cat that's getting a say in this scenario is my weapon.

"You can go," I tell him. "I've got it from here. Damien is meeting me at the shed to let him in."

"Not a chance in hell."

“Arrow,” I say, turning to face him as we come to a stop, “I don’t need a babysitter. I’m just as trained as anyone here. You following me around like I’m some incapable helpless woman is infuriating. Go.”

Instead, he just stands there, staring at me. I swear neither of us blinks for five solid minutes and my frustration is slowly brewing into anger, and I don’t get angry. Which only makes me all the more angry with him. This man tests the patience that I have worked my entire life to perfect.

People think that it’s women who can’t control their emotions. But it’s not. We control them and change them in order to get the reaction we want from those around us. So instead of fighting him, which will only cause him to fight me back, I play a new angle.

“I want the Kings to see I can do a good job, that I can be a part of this team,” I say in a soft voice. “If you’re always following me or helping, then they won’t see what I can do. Please, please just let me do this.”

I turn on the puppy dog eyes and change my stance from stiff to soft, leaning forward in mock defeat.

Arrow looks at me with a challenge, and I know he can see exactly what I’m doing. But he doesn’t comment, he just turns around and heads back to the hospital.

“Someone’s a manipulator,” Havoc murmurs.

“I prefer to think of myself as an outcome engineer. But no one asked for your opinion, buddy,” I say as I turn back into the strong independent woman I am and shove the ears into his rib cage just a little harder.

“You shouldn’t have to pretend for your boyfriend, that’s messed up.”

“He is *not* my boyfriend,” I say as I pinch the back of his arm and cause his hand to cramp and spasm. Trigger points are some of the best knowledge I’ve ever received.

As Havoc regains his composure, he glances down at me. “You’re kinda feisty. I like that.”

I roll my eyes again as the shed comes into view. Damien is standing by the door with it cracked open.

“Who’s this?” Damien asks as we approach.

“This is Havoc,” I say. “He apparently trained Evie. He also came to warn her and try to stop the men who were sent after her.”

Damien’s whole attitude has been the worst to deal with in all of this. The one man who was always sure of himself and what he wanted is now walking around like a wounded dog. I see his face harden as I escort Havoc into his new cell. Damien will never admit it, but he still loves Evie, even if he’s mad at her.

“What do you mean he tried to warn her? How did he know this was going to happen?”

I rehash the conversation we had in Evie’s hospital room and bring him up to speed. If he hadn’t run out like an offended child he would know what’s going on. As soon as I finish talking Damien turns on his heels and leaves.

My phone chimes and a message with the codes for the shed pops up from Damien. I move to put the phone back in my pocket when it chimes again. All the color drains from my face as I read a message that is *not* from Damien.

“Hey, you okay?” Havoc asks, but I can’t answer him. All I can do is stare at the message in front of me.

Adrik: You keep working for me or I’ll tell her who you are.

Ringling starts up in my ears. It’s only when Havoc puts a cuffed hand on my shoulder that I can come back to myself. He glances at the message over my shoulder while I do nothing to hide it from him.

Maybe he can help me.

“I don’t know what to do,” I tell him with tears in my eyes. And for once, they aren’t fake. “I’ve done everything I can to protect her, she’s worth protecting. My family went into hiding

for her. I've risked their lives for *her*, and he's going to ruin it. Just like that."

My breaths come in short pants and I'm aware that I'm hyperventilating, but there's nothing I can do to stop it. She's going to find out who I am. She's going to find out what I did. And after that, I'll never get my friend back. She will *never* trust me again.

Havoc pulls me close, and there's something about the scent of him that makes my breathing regulate. I squeeze my eyes tight and try desperately to think of a plan.

"I've known E for a long time," Havoc says, almost in a whisper "If you tell her the truth she will forgive you. It will take time, and it will hurt, but she *will* forgive you."

I let his words sink in. The fact that he's locked in a room and chained to a wall but still choosing to comfort and help me tells me everything I need to know about him. He's a good guy, we can trust him.

I pull back and wipe the tears from my face. "Thank you, I'm going to go and talk to her. I never wanted to keep this from her, but there was never a good way to tell her."

He nods in understanding, probably feeling the same way I am. The Kings want to protect her because they love her, but Havoc and I want to protect her because she's family to us. I can see it in the way he looks at me. The sadness in his eyes, the sincerity. He knows what Evie looks like at her weakest, and he hates that she looks that way again because he couldn't stop it.

"I'll be back with dinner. If she lets me live, that is." I back out of the room while an odd feeling settles in my stomach. I type in the code Damien gave me to lock up and turn to find Arrow standing right behind me.

I jump in surprise. "What the heck," I say, throwing my hand over my chest where my heart is racing. I was so lost in thought I didn't even hear him. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

“Why were you in there so long?” he asks, ignoring my question altogether.

“None of your business,” I say as I walk around him.

“Were you crying?” Arrow turns me to him and pinches my chin in his fingers, forcing my eyes to lock with his. His nose flares when he sees the truth, but I won’t give him an answer.

I jerk my head out of his grip and start back on my way to see my friend. I need to get this over with. I just hope she’s awake enough that we can get through it. I stop in my tracks and decide to head to my suite instead. If I can show her the emails, maybe she will understand.

The death threats on my family weren’t subtle. My father owed Adrik a debt, and I was the one who bore the responsibility of paying it off.

Sometimes I truly hate this life. The deals done in the dark always end up falling on the shoulders of someone who never asked to play the game. And this is a game I never wanted to be a part of.

Arrow is hot on my heels, refusing to leave my side even when I pick up my pace to a slight jog. I’m not trying to run from him, I’m just trying to get this whole situation over with.

I hate the unknown and the anxiety it brings. Running at least gives me a reason for my heart rate to be this erratic.

Alexi is going to kill me when he finds out. They all might kill me.

A massive headache begins to build, so the moment I enter the suite, I go straight for the Advil. It’s probably more psychological than physical, but I need to believe something will help right now. As I move to my room to grab my computer, Arrow stops me.

“Talk to me,” he pleads, his voice breaking ever so slightly. It’s then that I see the concern in his eyes. I know this man cares about me, but he’s got to be at least twelve years older than me, and he’s the dean of the university. Nothing can happen between us.

But even as those thoughts cross my mind, I find myself pulling him closer. It's not until our lips collide that I realize just how much I need this. I open my mouth for him and his tongue swipes in. He pulls me close, wrapping his arms around my body like a vice, and I'm locked to him.

His hands find my ass and he lifts me up. My legs instinctively wrap around him. His passion is undeniable, and my pull to him is like the tide sweeping me under. Before I know it, I'm drowning in his embrace. He wraps around me like he was made for me, like we were made for each other.

Our lips don't part because if we stop, reality is coming for us and neither of us are ready to let go. My fingers claw up his neck and into his hair and he growls deep in his throat. The sensation that sound brings to my center has me turning feral. With two hands, I grab the back of his shirt and rip it off.

The blonde hair and pink attire might fool most people into thinking I like the sweet stuff, but they couldn't be more wrong. My long manicured nails dig into his back, leaving marks that just might bleed.

His arms flex as he pulls me from the wall just to slam me against it again. A gust of air leaves my lungs only for him to suck it into his. My head swims with lust as he grabs my hands and forces them above my head. He grinds into me, holding my wrists in one hand and my ass in the other.

It's enough to have me panting, soaking my pink gym shorts as I move my hips with his. Both of his hands move to cup my ass as he walks us into my room and throws me on my bed. Not a light toss, this man launches me across the room with the strength of a fucking gorilla. I get up on my knees to face him and watch as he pulls his torn shirt from his body.

I take in his chest, flexing with the power of a titan. His clothing has been more deceiving than I realized. He is a beautiful wall of muscle without clearly defined abs, but even then he's sexy as hell.

His knees hit the bed in front of me, and he grabs the back of my neck, fisting my hair in his rough hold. My hands go to

his chest, nails scratching down his front all the way until they reach that tuft of hair just above his pants.

I should stop here. We should stop here. But when his eyes lock on mine, the possessiveness in them flares and I give in. Evie could kill me for what I'm about to tell her, so I might as well live while I can.

Arrow looks at me with a challenge in his eyes. He loves to boss me around and usually, I'll comply. He's been as constant as Evie has in my life since I got here, and I can't imagine my days without him in it. So it's not a surprise when he tries to take control here too.

"Lay down," he orders. But this isn't a room where I listen to him without question or a fight. In here, I'm all me, and he's about to find out exactly who I am.

"Make me," I whisper.

He pulls on my hair tighter, trying to bend me back, but I grab his shoulders and pull him with me then force us to roll over so I'm on top. I straddle his lap and grind down onto his impressively hard cock.

The look of shock and arousal in his eyes only spurs me on. He removes his hold on my hair and grabs my hips, forcing my soaked center to grind into his sweatpants. His hands move to the front of my shorts as I push up, and he grabs each side of the inner seam in a fist and rips them apart.

"Hey, these were my best shorts," I say. Even though the move was sexy as hell.

"Yeah, well, that was my most comfortable shirt," he replies, and we both smile. Things with him are always easy, which is why I finally pause. I don't want one fleeting moment to ruin what we have.

"Don't," he says, seeing the change in my posture. He sits up so our eyes are only inches apart. "I want this, I want you. I've wanted you for the past five months. I just didn't know if you wanted me too."

I rake my fingers through his hair, letting my nails scratch his head lightly. His eyes close and I really take in this man

under me. The man who makes my heart physically ache whenever we have to separate so people don't see us.

I stare at the sun outline tattoo behind his ear, his dark hair with specks of gray just starting to peek through. His tanned skin and face are full of hard angles that seem almost soft with me. When his eyes open, the way the dark brown sparkles has my heart beating a little bit faster.

Arrow is safe, he's my safe space. And the fact that he's questioned my want for him has me needing to prove just how much he means to me. Slowly, I lean in and kiss his lips. Not hard like before when I was angry and afraid, but soft and full of the desperation I have for him.

"I want you," I whisper on his lips. "I need you." I pull on the hem of his pants, and he helps me pull them down while I rid myself of my now-torn shorts. "There isn't a night that went by that I came here, back to my bed, and didn't wish you were in it with me."

His hands move under my shirt, unfastening my bra with the precision of a skilled surgeon. My soaked center is hovering above him and when he grinds up into me, I gasp at just how thick he really is. His tip nudges my clit and my whole body shudders. A moan escapes my lips and his breath hitches.

He moves his dick to do it again and my response is the same.

"Fuck, I could listen to that sound all day," he says, sliding back and forth, teasing my entrance with the promise of a stretch I can tell will be painfully fulfilling.

I push him to lie back as I chase my pleasure, grinding back and forth on his length. I have an arsenal of toys under this bed, and yet this feels better than any of them. His warm cock, coated in my arousal and sliding over my clit is euphoric.

"Have you gotten off to the thought of me in this bed?" Arrow asks me, his eyes glued to my body as I rock back and forth. I nod, shamelessly. "Show me, I want to see just what you like."

I bite my lip, nervous to show him exactly what I do when no one is here. Some men are cool with toys in the bedroom, others run faster than a cheetah going after its first meal in a week. My body stops rocking as I think about this decision. Toys are the best game, adding so much more pleasure to this little dance than any generic sex could. I might as well see if he can play.

I climb off him and stand next to the bed. I look him up and down, taking in the sight of his cock glistening with my juices before asking, "Are you sure?"

His brows furrow but he nods. I bend down and pull out the drawer that contains all of my toys. Pink whips, feathers, chains, and rose gold rope sit at the top. Glass dildos of all shapes and sizes line one side, while vibrators for every hole line the other. And in the middle is an arrangement of anal toys that have all different textures and functions.

In the basket beside my bed, I have a selection of oils and lubricants carefully hidden but easy enough to grab if a quick need were to arise. The whole setup is more stocked than most sex stores, and the look Arrow gives me as he takes it all in is one of pure shock and mischief.

I grab the toy I use most when I think about him. It's a thrusting rabbit made of bright pink silicone. I forgo the lube this time because I'm already soaked. Climbing onto the bed, I lay next to him and spread my legs.

"I like to think about you kissing my inner thighs, your teeth scraping over them as you keep them spread wide," I say as I tease the toy at my entrance. "Then, when you can't hold back anymore, you push your fingers into me." I let the first inch of the toy slide in and start up the vibrator. He's captivated, watching the toy enter me as one of his hands palms my thighs and spreads them wider.

He sits up and moves between my legs, getting a front-row view of my pussy dripping for him. He bends down and kisses my inner thighs and my mouth falls open, panting at the sight of my fantasy coming to life. His hands palm my legs and

spread me as wide as I can manage before one works its way up to the toy I'm holding onto.

"Tell me how this works," he commands as he bats my hand away and replaces it with his own.

I explain which buttons do what as best as I can through the pleasure that hasn't stopped from the toy. His body coils tight like an animal ready to pounce. My arousal is practically squirting around the silicone at this point, and it's hardly inside me. He pushes it in another inch just to pull it back to the tip. I let out a whimper, desperate to be full. But it's not really the toy I want. It's him.

He leans in and takes a deep breath. "You smell like candy," he breathes just over my clit before pressing a feather-light kiss to it that has goosebumps erupting all over my body and a moan escaping my lips. I push down, needing more. He gets the hint and thrusts the toy all the way in, making me gasp in surprise.

"Better warm you up baby, this toy has nothing on me." I shudder, knowing just how true that is. The anticipation is killing me already. When he pushes the button to make it start thrusting, I nearly come right there. My fists grab the sheets in desperation, wanting to hold off so this can last as long as possible.

"You can come, baby girl. I'm not ending this at just one. I won't be finished with you until you're a mess, begging me to stop. Then I'll force one more out of you, just so you never forget who owns this pussy."

My back arches off the bed with his promise, and I come so fast it's hard to catch my breath. He pushes the toy in further than I knew was possible as my walls contract, and it feels so good that I roll into another orgasm.

"Fuck yes," I scream, stars exploding behind my eyes. My hips rock into the motion until it all becomes too much. Arrow pulls the toy out, turns it off, and tosses it on the floor. Everything is sensitive as he takes his time exploring with his fingers while I squirm underneath him.

“Don’t make me use that rope, baby girl,” he threatens, having no idea how much I want him to do just that. But we both have things to do today, so I save the defiance for later when we can really play. I will my body to relax as he spreads my folds open with two fingers before leaning in and blowing over my swollen clit.

It’s an odd feeling of cold and warm, making tingles gather at my entrance. He does it again and I suck in a breath, confused if it feels good or not. He doesn’t give me much time to think about it though because his fingers begin to close until they pinch over my clit, and his lips go straight to it before he sucks.

My hips buck instinctively. The sensation is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. He lifts his head with a smile. “I thought you might like that,” he says before doing it again. This time, I let the noises loose.

He slides his fingers down and pushes them into me while keeping suction on my clit. Curling his fingers inside me, he sets a rhythm that has me panting in under a minute, already on the brink of another orgasm. I’ve never made myself come more than twice, so the thought of three is a torturously beautiful thing.

“Give it to me, baby girl, let me feel that pussy clench for me,” he demands, and my body listens. Ever the good student.

My moans could likely be heard outside at this point, but he’s not phased. All too soon, he’s pulling his fingers free. I have no idea how I’ll be able to give him another, but when I look down at his hard and extremely large cock, all I know is I want to try.

“Condoms?” he asks.

“I’m covered,” I tell him, not wanting to go into detail at the moment. He assesses me for a minute before he nods, then lines himself up with my entrance.

“How many guys have fucked you like this?” he asks.

“Do you really want to know?” I tease, wanting to make him sweat just a tad. I have always loved the art of

manipulation, but when I see him freeze and his body stiffens above me, I don't like the look in his eyes.

"You'll be the first man I've fucked without a condom, if you're sure you want to keep going." I don't want him to feel like he has to do this. We can still stop if he's not ready.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks, moving to sit up above me. My hand reaches out, pulling his neck down so I can kiss him. My nails scratch in his hair, and I moan at the feeling of the head of his dick still just teasing me.

"Not even a little bit," I whisper as I break the kiss.

One of his hands fists my hair at the base of my neck while the other is braced beside my head. "Good girl."

It's all the warning I get before he pushes his massive cock inside me. The stretch is so much more than I imagined and way better than any toy I've yet to play with. A whimper escapes me, one of pain and pleasure. His eyes bore into mine and I nod, not wanting him to stop.

He eases out ever so gently, just to thrust back in. The pace he sets is brutal, but my body adjusts quickly, and soon I start moving my hips with him.

"Does that feel good, baby," he asks, pushing up to watch himself slide in and out of me. I watch too, our eyes fixed on the spot where we come together. It's filthy and sticky and so fucking hot, which makes me push up harder.

"More," I beg.

"You want to come again, greedy girl?" Arrow pulls out and gets onto his knees, then leans down and flips me over in one fluid motion. He lands a smack on my ass as my face buries itself into my pillow and I let out a muffled scream.

"Beg for it," he commands as he pulls my ass up in the air. He teases my entrance again with the promise of him and I'm all too willing to do as he asks.

"Please, sir," I pant, hoping this is what he wants because it feels all too right in the moment. "Please fuck me with your fat cock. Fill me up. Give me more."

He pushes the head in as he leans over my back. “As you wish.”

Arrow thrusts all the way in again, and he feels even bigger from this angle. “Shit you’re so fucking tight, baby,” he pants.

His hand goes to my hair, clenching right at the base of my neck and forcing my back to bend. I reach back and grab his ass, digging my nails in as he fucks me. The clenching of his muscles under my hands turns me on even more, and I find myself coming again all too soon.

“That’s it, baby girl, come on my cock, fuck.” He keeps up his pace, but only just. I can tell he’s getting close as I start to come down. Everything is too much, and him filling me up starts to feel painful. I try to move away, but he takes my hips in his hands, his fingers digging in.

“You can give me one more,” Arrow orders, but my brain is in overdrive. There is no way I can come again.

He flips me on my back, pinning me under him like a man possessed. He leans down and grabs a new toy, one of my favorite bullet vibrators. *Guess he likes to play too.*

As soon as he turns it on, he presses it right against my sensitive clit and I try to squirm away again, the sensation overwhelming.

“I’m not stopping until you give me one more,” he says, almost like a threat.

Tears build in my eyes. Not of pain, but of torturous pleasure. I nod in agreement because I want to give him more. I want to give him all of me. He pushes himself back inside me with the vibrator held tightly to my clit, and it doesn’t take long before the familiar feeling starts to build.

I’ve gotten off to thoughts of him in this bed with me more times than I can count and now that it’s finally happening, it’s so much better than the mere idea of him. Being able to look into his eyes, filled with lust for me as he claims every ounce of pleasure I can give, has me exploding.

Spots cloud my vision and I’m pretty sure I’m going to pass out when I feel him stiffen inside me. Heat races up my insides

and I come again. It's small, but it's definitely there. I know he feels it when he shudders.

“Damn, that's a good little girl. So good for me.”

He stays fully seated inside me as he turns off the toy and nearly falls on top of my body. My arms wrap around him, and I find myself never wanting to let go.

Light kisses trace my collarbone as I fade in and out of reality. Everything feels foggy and so good. Like I'm on a cloud, floating through time and space. He eventually pulls out and I wince at the soreness.

“I got you, baby,” he promises, pecking a light kiss on my forehead. He gets up and soon after I hear the sound of the shower starting up. He comes back to the bed and lifts me into his arms. His body is warm and tender. I swear I feel like we were made for each other.

He steps under the spray, and I can't even lift my head from his chest as he rinses us off under the steaming hot water. At first, it burns but then the sting gives way to relief. We stay in there until I can hardly keep my eyes open. He sets me down gently on my feet after stepping out, and somehow, I manage to stay up until he wraps me in a fluffy towel.

“Was that too much?”

I smile at him as he wraps me in his arms. I stand on my tippy toes and gently kiss his lips. “That was everything I never knew I needed.”

He smiles back and pulls me into a deep kiss. “Are you ready to tell me why you were crying?”

“I need to tell you something,” I say carefully. I don't need him to turn on me, but I need to talk all this shit through. I'm going crazy being trapped inside my head.

“Okay,” he says. “Go get in bed and I'll grab us some water.”

I watch him leave and hurry to dry off and get into my plush robe. I don't feel like putting on clothes quite yet, and I honestly need a nap before I go and tell my best friend that I'm

really a fraud. Arrow hands me a drink once I get settled under the covers and he joins me on the other side and takes one of my hands in his.

“What’s going on?”

I bite my lip, anxious to confess everything but also nervous he won’t want me anymore once he knows. “You know how we just found out about Evie’s uncle?” He nods his head in response.

“Three years ago my brother was murdered, brutally. A rival of my father captured him and tortured him for days before killing him. The rival negotiated for days, making my father all but beg just to then turn around and kill my brother anyways.”

I look down in my lap, not wanting to relive any of those days or memories ever again. Clearing my throat, I continue as Arrow takes my hand in his. “My father didn’t have a lot of money left, but he knew a guy and hired him to kill his rival for a favor in the future. And seven months ago, Adrik cashed in his favor. Turns out he was a friend of a friend of my father’s and when he found out I got into this school, he said the favor was that I needed to spy on Evie for him and report everything back.”

I let it all sink in for him. “What the fuck?” Arrow says, letting go of my hand. “You’ve been lying to her this whole time? Pretending to be her friend?”

He’s nearly out of the bed when tears spring to my eyes. This is exactly what I was afraid of. “No, it’s not like that, please let me finish.”

He eyes me warily, but he knows me better than most. And he knows I don’t hurt people for no reason.

“Two weeks in, I was sick with myself. I hated everything so I called my parents to talk about it. We agreed they would go into hiding, and I would find a way to get on Evie’s side here so that maybe she could find a way to protect us. I knew after only a short period of time with her that she was someone who could help us. I chose her, we all chose her.”

My voice breaks as I come to terms with this next part.

“But he caught my younger sister. She insisted she say goodbye to her boyfriend and got caught. He said if I didn’t make a statement that I was on his side then he was going to kill her.”

A sob breaks free, and I choke out the final words as I feel bile rise in my throat. “The video, it was me.”

My hands cover my face as the tears pour out. I have never felt worse about myself than when I hacked into that mass message and changed the video. I have never wanted to die more. If my sister hadn’t gotten away from him, I likely would have killed myself soon after, especially after helping Evie in the shower with the aftermath of it all.

Strong hands grab mine, pulling them away from my face. Arrow takes one look at me, then pulls me into his arms as I cry the tears that have been begging to be set loose since that day.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but when I finally open my eyes, the sun is starting to set.

“You didn’t have a choice,” Arrow says, gently combing his fingers through my hair. “Where is your sister now?”

“She got away. My dad was able to get her out, but I got this message just as I was leaving Havoc.” I grab my phone from the nightstand and hand it to him. The anger that flares in his eyes has me terrified he’s about to lash out. But when he drops it and pulls me closer, I’m reminded of the man he is and why I trust him.

“You need to tell her first so you can all come up with a plan.”

I nod into his chest. I know I need to tell her, I’m just afraid that when I do, everything is going to change.



Chapter 3

They are finally letting me stay awake. It's been just over thirty-six hours since the surgery and I feel like shit. The pain medicine is helping, but it also makes me feel weak and spacy. I don't like it.

Lev is sitting at my side, and I still can't figure out why they suddenly don't hate me anymore. So instead of working myself up and freaking out, I take the more logical approach.

"What changed?" I ask him.

His eyes shoot up to meet mine like he's shocked I'm speaking. Then they go soft as they take me in. I know my face looks like shit. I can feel the bruising and honestly, even talking hurts. But I need to know.

Lev gets up from the chair beside my bed and scoots in next to me. It's larger than most hospital beds, allowing both of us to fit comfortably, but him being close is overwhelming right now. I feel like my emotions are everywhere and I can't think straight.

"When we got on the boat, we regretted everything immediately. I think the shock of it all got to us."

Gently, he wraps me in his arms until my face is lying on his chest.

"Alexi installed cameras in the living room, and we checked to see if you had left yet. That's when we saw them attacking you. He called Laney, I called Nessa, and when we got back, I ran."

He squeezes me tight, but also tenderly. I can feel his body start shaking and when I look up, his eyes are glassy.

"You said you loved us," he informs me as the tears track down his cheeks. "But it was said more like a goodbye."

His hand wipes away the tears like he's angry they fell, but I reach up and catch one on my thumb.

"I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm crying," he says as more tears fall.

I wipe at them with my thumb then take his face in my hand. "I do love you," I confess. "And I didn't want to say goodbye." I didn't believe I could make it out of what had happened, but he needed to know it wasn't a game to me. They all did. I didn't say those words to hurt him, I said them so that if I did leave this world, they knew that my love for them was real and it was the very last thing I thought of.

Lev cries harder now and pulls me impossibly closer. Eventually, my tears join his. We lay there, glued together, letting our emotions run their course. We don't have a clock in here so I have no idea how much time has passed when he finally pulls back and looks me in the eye.

"I love you, Lucky Charm, and you are not allowed to leave this world unless I'm leaving it too, do you understand?"

It's the first order he's ever given me, and I don't have to think twice about responding. "I won't, I understand."

I sit up to kiss him and even with a split lip and a bruised face, it's everything I needed. Lev has always lit a fire in me, he's always been the one. But I need him to know he's not the only one.

"I love them too," I tell him gently, afraid it might hurt him. "Please don't make me choose."

"You already chose all of us, and we've chosen you right back. Even if Damien is in a shit mood, we all choose you."

My body sags with relief only to realize this all may be for nothing.

"Boris," I say as I push myself to sit up too quickly. My head sways as panic grips me. "He's here. He's here for me."

Lev's brows crease, but he grabs my hands. "He won't be coming in here without your permission."

"He doesn't care about permission," I nearly yell as panic sets into my bones. I'm a sitting duck here even with Lev by my side. We wouldn't be a challenge to a man like him.

"This man has been after me my entire life. He will stop at nothing to get to me. Nothing." I start to hyperventilate, unable to control the panic gripping my chest.

Lev's hand goes to my hair. "We need to talk to you. Someone has been lying to you. When you were asleep, we were able to put some pieces together. Plus, your friend arrived and filled in a lot of the puzzle."

"My friend?" I question, wondering just how much could have happened while I was asleep. My breathing starts to calm as my mind sets on a different course. *Who the fuck is my friend?*

"Havoc," he replies with a nod, and my body stills. If Havoc is here, then none of these men are safe.

"Where is he? Where is he right now?" I ask with a little too much bite. Lev looks at me like he wants to question my

attitude, but I'm not about to lose them. Not after everything. I need to know where he is before he kills everyone here.

“Havoc is one of the world's most deadly and well-trained assassins. If he's here, then none of you are safe. That man got arrested, sent to Guantanamo Bay, killed his mark inside, and escaped within three days.”

Lev's eyes go wide, finally understanding the gravity of this situation. “I need to talk to him. Right now!”

Lev gets out his phone and within a minute, Alexi is walking into the room with a tablet. “He's right here,” Alexi says to me, handing over the screen with the cameras already pulled up.

I look closely at the footage of him sitting on the bed. He's unnaturally still. It's weird seeing him locked up in Damien's shed. Especially knowing how easily he could escape it.

That's when I see it. Havoc has always had a thing for numbers. Fifteen is a go-to of his when it comes to looping video feeds. Right at the fifteen-second mark, his pinky twitches. And it does it again at exactly the next fifteen-second mark.

“He's not in there,” I tell Alexi, handing him the tablet.

Clapping sounds from behind my door and Havoc appears. I want to smile seeing my friend, but I'm also terrified of his reason for being here.

“Very good, little E. You always did know all my tricks.”

He walks into the room, but Alexi raises a gun and Lev has out his tactical whip before I can blink. Which isn't saying much with the amount of drugs I'm currently on, but still.

“Stop,” I tell them all, knowing I need to gain control of the situation before things get astronomically worse. They all freeze, but no one looks at me. Their eyes are all trained on each other, waiting like predators about to pounce. “Havoc, put the blade on the counter. Both of them.”

He doesn't hesitate to listen, and both of the guys are shocked he had them hidden in his hands. My father taught me

how to throw a knife, but Havoc is the one who taught me how to make sure it isn't seen until you're being stabbed with it.

"Ghost, Alexi, put the weapons down. He won't hurt you, will you?" I glare at Havoc, enough of a warning. I don't care why my uncle sent him, no one is dying here today.

"I'm not here to hurt them, I'm here to tell you the truth," Havoc says, raising his hands in surrender.

"What truth?" I ask as I pull Lev to sit beside me again. Alexi stays standing, eyeing Havoc like a guard dog.

I know Havoc has a third knife on him, we always have three. But I'm not stripping him of his last defense and as far as the guys know, he doesn't have any left so it *should* bring down the hostility in the room as well as let Havoc know that I still trust him.

It doesn't.

Alexi looks ready to attack as Havoc inches closer. I reach out for him though and Alexi finally moves out from in front of the bed. Havoc leans over and wraps me in a warm hug.

"I'm so sorry," he says in a whisper. "I truly didn't know he was planning this."

In all the time I've known him, the only time I've heard an apology slip through his lips was when he whispered it to his dead wife. So, him apologizing to me has every hair on my body standing at attention.

"What are you sorry for?"

He pulls back and sits in the chair beside my bed, taking my hand in his.

"This is going to be a lot, and I need you to let me get through all of it until the end okay? Save the questions for after." I nod, slightly annoyed that he knows me and my reactions to new information so well.

"I was just coming back from a mission when I went to see Adrik. He was in his office on the phone. Usually, when I see he's on the phone, I'll wait outside so I don't bother him, but this time I listened when I heard your name. He sent the men

here after you. Not the ones that went after Alexi, we still aren't sure who did that, but the ones who put you here." He gestures to the bed, and my world spins.

"I started doing some digging," he continues, "and I found that he was responsible for a lot of the stuff that happened to you. Adrik is the one who had that checkpoint set up which caused you to fail your challenge, and then he sent Giovanni after you when you escaped. I don't know the reason behind it but when I questioned him, he threatened me and I knew then I needed to warn you."

Nausea and anger rise in me so swiftly that I attempt to get out of the bed without thinking. Lev pulls me back to him as I shake my head, not wanting any of this to be true.

Why would he do this to me?

"He also hired and forced students and teachers here to come after you. I don't know all the details, but I do know he's been keeping tabs on you."

"Why?" I croak out, not able to understand.

"I think he wanted to control you and make you kill Boris. In my research, I was also able to uncover that Boris wasn't the one to kill your parents. I don't know for sure if it was Adrik or whoever he was working with at the time but the evidence points to him being the one to set it up."

"WHAT?" I scream, now fully freaking the fuck out.

"I think that's enough for now," Alexi says to Havoc.

"You mean there's more?" I yell. "This motherfucker who called himself my family and pretended to care has more to add to the list other than the fact that I've just been a pawn in his little game for the past eleven years?"

I know I'm asking to be pulled back under right now, but I cannot seem to fathom how this is all true. Yet, as the idea settles, it really hits me.

"There's one last thing," Havoc says, looking at Alexi, silently asking permission to finish. This man should know me better by now.

“You better look me in my motherfucking eyes and tell me the last thing, or I will fight tooth and nail until I land a hit on both of your faces,” I say, looking between Havoc and Alexi with the fury of Hades so strong in my eyes I’m stunned my hair doesn’t morph into blue flames.

“The reason, at least the only one I can seem to find so far for this, is because Boris stole Adrik’s fiancé and in some way, your father betrayed him too, but I don’t know how.”

I laugh, actually full-blown belly laugh to the point where the freshly stitched knife wound throbs, but I can’t stop it. I laugh hysterically until tears fill my eyes, not all from pain but from how truly fucked this all is.

He did this all for a girl. He ruined my life because of a fucking girl. A girl who’s dead.

These men stare at me like I’ve officially lost it, and maybe I have. I just found out the reason I was trained to be an assassin, the reason I was sent to a prison camp to be raped and tortured, was all for a motherfucking dead person and some stupid semblance of revenge?

All of the trauma, all of the sleepless nights and agony I endured was pointless. All the fighting, clawing my way to get this revenge he made me believe would fix me, was all for nothing. I thought he cared about me. I thought he cared about them. And now I’m nowhere near getting my revenge because I have no idea who fucking killed my parents, and my life has been spent doing someone else’s dirty work.

This can’t be right. He’s supposed to be smarter than that. He trained me. Never get emotional. It was his one rule.

But everything about the person he created me to be was a reflection of his own emotions.

I wipe the tears from my face and finally look at these men. “This is so fucked up, why is Boris here if he isn’t after me?”

I see Alexi flinch out of the corner of my eye, and I brace myself for more. I have a feeling the next few days are going to make my brain feel like it’s in overdrive. But I want to

know. I need to know it all so I can figure out what the fuck I'm going to do with my life.

“Just tell me,” I say to him as I lean back into Lev. His arms move lightly around me, careful to avoid the stitches. I relax in his hold. If anyone makes me feel safe, it's him. So I let myself embrace it.

Alexi sits in front of me, his tired eyes looking so broken and disheveled, so very not... him. “I'll tell you if you tell us what's going on. Why are you here?”

I take a deep breath, ready for this to be over. “My uncle sent me to get close to you all. He wanted us to create an alliance so I would be trusted and welcome to come visit you. He wanted me to get close enough to Boris to take him out.”

They must have figured as much because none of them so much as flinch, but I need to tell them everything so we can maybe move past this.

“I was supposed to relay information to him so he could work on weakening the organization from the outside. That way, when I did go after Boris, I didn't look like the prime suspect. I wanted to tell you, to work with you. In fact, I was coming to tell you everything when...”

I trail off, shaking my head. I can't change the past any more than I can force myself to grow wings and fly away from all of this.

“Anyways, I told him I planned to bring you guys into the loop and this,” I gesture to my body, “must have been his way of telling me no.”

Now that I think about it, every time I wanted to do something different than him, I ended up suffering in some way. I thought maybe it was just how I had to learn, but now I'm thinking he had more of a hand in it than I realized at the time.

“How did he know where I was?” I ask Havoc.

“I think that's enough information for one day, E.”

Doc walks into the room then. “I think I can help fill you in there,” he says. “During your surgery, there was a weird object that kept showing up behind your rib cage on images. When we were fixing the wound on your abdomen, I looked around and found this.”

He holds up a small tracker and my blood goes cold. There is only one time that he could have put that in me. I shiver and Lev sits us up, knowing what’s coming. But I’m so fucking done with this feeling of pain and misery, dread and sorrow. I’m just done. I want to not feel for five whole minutes.

I grab the button that gives me pain medication and push it twice, knowing that the dose is enough to knock me out. I just need a minute, and I can’t think of another way to make the world stop spinning so fast.

“Let’s just give her some time,” Lev says. He gestures for everyone to leave, and no one questions him. He turns us so that we are on our sides facing each other.

“Just let it run its course. I’m here, okay? I love you, and I’m not going anywhere.” His hands go to my hair as my eyes start to feel heavy. He makes everything feel so much easier. I let his presence soothe me into sleep.



I jolt awake at the sound of the door sliding open, afraid it’s Boris. Alexi never did tell me why he was here. But instead, Laney walks into the room. I smile at my friend as I settle back into the bed. Lev sits up and gives me a kiss on the forehead before getting out of the bed.

“I’ll let you girls talk while I go grab us coffee,” he says, slipping out of the room.

When I look back at Laney, something feels off. “More bad news?” I ask, rolling onto my back and pinching the bridge of my nose between my fingers. “Just get it over with.”

I don’t look at her but I hear her sit on the edge of the bed. “Before we get into this, I need you to know I chose you. Ever since the first day we met, I chose you.”

I remember Havoc saying people here were working for my uncle and dread settles in my stomach over what I'm about to hear. My shoulders feel like bricks are weighing me down and I want to turn away if only to wait and face this on another day. But that's not an option.

"I had to play his game until my family could go into hiding, or he would have killed them." She opens her laptop and I watch as she pulls up an encrypted email. "But I want you to see everything I didn't tell him."

I'm tempted to read through it all, to know every little detail so that we can find a way to use it against him, but the look on her face tells me she's being honest with me. I can't handle another lie, another betrayal right now. I get the feeling that if she could give me any piece of information that might be vital to turning the tides at this moment, then she would.

I know I can trust her. She did come to me after all. She's fought by my side through all of this. If my uncle was threatening her family, then I get why she would need to play his game.

"I don't need to read it, I already know this friendship is real." It doesn't mean the realization doesn't hurt like hell, but maybe the information they exchanged can help me figure out what my uncle is up to and why.

"The look on your face alone is enough to tell me how hurt you are by all of this." I'm hurt too that she felt she couldn't trust me with this truth before I almost died, but I'm not sure if I can hold any more anger in my heart. "Do I wish you would have told me sooner? Yeah, but we both had walls to break down, and I feel like we learned to do that together." The look on her face tells me there's more though.

She takes a deep breath before ruining our relationship for good. "I switched the video. Alexi never put that video in the email. It was me. I tried to find you to try to pull you away, but..." she trails off as my face contorts. It could have been anything. Anything but that and I would have let her walk out of this room, having forgiven her without a second thought.

“You let me believe he did that, you kept swearing it had to be him,” I say, my voice deathly calm while my insides tremble like an earthquake. As if the foundation of my very being is cracking.

“I was so afraid you would find out it was me,” she says as tears fill her eyes. But she doesn’t get to cry here.

“Get the fuck out,” I warn.

“Please, please let me explain. He had my sister. He...”

“GET OUT!”

Lev walks in holding two coffees, confusion crossing his face the second he sees how worked up I am. “Get the fuck out before I tell them all what you did.”

My chest is heaving, pain splintering down the center as if my heart were physically breaking. I have nowhere to run, nothing I can do to let this hurt not consume me fully. Laney is still sitting next to me when I lash out to hit her, but Lev stops me.

“Lucky Charm,” he says, making me realize what I’m about to do as the girl who was my very first friend flinches under the weight of my raised hand. Part of me feels bad because this isn’t me, and the look that she gives me only makes everything hurt more.

“Get. The fuck. OUT!”

She finally listens, turning to scurry out of the room. A massive headache erupts behind my eyes and burns so bright I honestly wish I would have just died from that stab wound.

Is there a single fucking person in the world I can actually trust right now?

Damien comes in right after Laney walks out and if I thought I wanted to be dead before, the hollow look he gives me only solidifies the feeling. Lev said he was in a shit mood, and he definitely took this all the worst, but the bags under his eyes and the annoyance in his posture sets my teeth on edge.

“Just get it over with,” I say through gasps. “Yell, hit me, I don’t fucking care but you do *not* get to look at me like *that*.”

The look of hatred and indifference in his eyes makes me want to stab myself again because that pain is so much less than the one I'm feeling now.

Lev gets into the bed beside me, running a hand through my hair and trying to help me calm down. But there's one more monster I have to fight before I can try to rest, and that's Damien.

"I'll look at you however the fuck I want," Damien says with a childish demeanor. It's funny that the one man who kept telling us to face our fears and emotions is the one who's running from his own faster than the speed of light.

"What do you want?" Lev asks, ignoring the way Damien's staring at me.

"Doc said you were on some meds and something isn't lining up with your blood work, he asked me to go get them. Where are they?" He looks at me when he asks but his eyes look distant, as if he's not even in the same room as us.

"I keep them all on my dresser, you know that." He's not only seen me take them, but I don't hide them.

He nods then leaves the room, dismissing me without a second thought. I don't know what you're supposed to feel when you just found out that your friend has been lying to you, your uncle has basically been using and torturing you your entire life, and then one of the men you love treats you like you're nothing more than the dirt on his shoes, but it's no doubt the worst I've ever felt in my entire life, and I survived a fucking prison camp. I'm so sick of hurting, so sick of crying and feeling that I wish I could shut it all off.

"You need to relax, Lucky Charm. This is all a lot. You don't need to have it figured out right now. D is angry, but he will come around. He just needs time. And so do you."

I nod and lean back into him. Now that everything's out in the open, it's easier to let him comfort me. I can accept that he cares now, because I feel like I've actually earned it. So, I let him wrap me in his arms and hold me tight. I let myself fall into his peace because knowing that he loves me is all I need

to close my eyes and believe that maybe one day it won't feel like this. Maybe one day it won't all be this goddamned hard.



Chapter 4

Seeing her only made the anger and resentment worse. Alexi updated me on everything that's been happening, all the realizations. But when I saw Lev get in that bed with her, cozying up to her like she isn't a little snake who's been going behind our backs for months, my brain short-circuited.

I don't want to be a dick to her or to the man I love, but shit has gotten so complicated I feel like I can't even think anymore. When Doc approached me with a task, I felt relieved. That is, until I had to talk to her. I wouldn't tell anyone this, but the thought of going into her room and getting her meds without her knowledge felt wrong, I just had to ask. Then it all went to shit.

That's what I'm thinking about as I wrench open our suite door and slam it shut behind me. I go right to her room but

stop in the doorway when her scent assaults me.

I'm the more sensitive one of the group, even more so than Lev, and I do my damn hardest not to show it. But the smell of her just reminds me of how I forced her to her knees in front of me. And her words afterward ring through my head louder than a bell tower pinging as you stand right next to it.

"You reminded me that men only want one thing from me, and in the end, you turned out to be no better than the rest of them."

My chest aches because she was right. I was hurt, I *am* hurt, and instead of asking or even begging to understand like I so desperately wanted to, I did the one thing to her that I knew would hurt the most. I *took*.

Fresh tears fall from my eyes as I invade her space, I know where her meds are on her dresser so I grab the two bottles. But then I remember the one she keeps in the bathroom by the sink. It's the one that's supposed to help her with her night terrors.

I walk to the sink and the smell of everything changes.

Some people may say it's because I'm the one who kills people, but that's not the reason I know that metallic scent in the air. I know that smell better than anything because I held Evie's half-dead body against me as she bled for over an hour. Then after she was stitched up, I wiped it all down as best I could. I don't think I will ever forget the smell of iron and water on her flesh.

That's why I take hesitant steps toward her bathtub, knowing that what I'll find may just be the last piece I need to break completely.

The second I see the crimson stain, I fall to my knees. I can picture exactly how it happened too. We left her and she needed to leave us. She needed to let us out so she could leave. It's probably the only reason the men who attacked her got the upper hand for even a minute. She was hurting and hurt herself because of us.

I think for a minute I'm going to throw up or pass out but I don't. I hold it back. I hold it in because I don't know what this feeling is, but I can't handle it.

I push myself to my feet, grab the remaining bottle, and rush back to Doc. He's sitting behind the nurse's station, not far from Evie's room. I shake the bottle and he jogs to meet me.

"Thank you, I really needed these," he says, grabbing them from my hands. He turns to walk away but I follow, needing to know why they were so important. Maybe he can help her get the dosage right so she can fucking sleep.

Flashes of her in my arms come to mind, her face screwed up in a silent scream, her shaking body as she tries to do the simplest of tasks her brain is wired to do; breathe.

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the memory and the awful thoughts that come with it. I gave her my truth the night that we slept together. She's the only one, and she still lied to me. It's not much, but that thought is enough to shove away the others so I can keep walking.

As soon as we reach a room that looks like a pharmacy, he sets the drugs down and starts putting on gloves to examine them. I lean against the wall and watch him closely. He uncaps one and his face contorts in a way I haven't seen before as he looks at the label then the pill he's holding. He sets it down only to open the next, and then the next.

Shaking his head, he finally looks at me. "Are you sure these are the ones she's been taking?"

I nod, knowing exactly what they look like. I've handed them to her countless times when she was weak or healing and even when I just knew it was part of her routine before we went on a run.

"This can't be right," he mumbles, going to a cabinet and pulling out a giant book. I peer over his shoulder to see what has him confused. It has pictures of the pills and capsules next to each drug name, and the first thing I notice is, Evie's don't match.

"What the fuck?" I whisper.

“My thoughts as well,” Doc says. “Her bloodwork last time was a mess, but I assumed it was stress and all the other things going on. I never thought to dig further. But this is insane. How often does she sleep?”

“Maybe four hours a night, the night terrors happen every night. Some nights I can get her back to sleep, but more often than not, Lev and I take turns going running with her at four in the morning.”

“When does she take these?”

“She takes that one at night,” I say, pointing to the capsule with a green substance inside. He takes it and grabs a dish, immediately getting to work. He uses a solution on it and starts moving it all around. I flip through the pages of the book, but it’s massive and I notice quickly the pill doesn’t look like anything in here.

After about twenty minutes he shakes a vial, and his face goes still.

“What?” I ask, standing to see what he sees. The light blue color doesn’t mean anything to me, but it must mean something to him. Instead of answering, he starts taking notes and gets to work with the other two pills.

“When does she take these?” he asks, not even bothering to look up at me. I don’t take it as a sign of disrespect. I can see the wheels turning in his brain as he diligently works. Something’s wrong here. So instead, I do what I can to help.

“The white one she takes in the mornings, and the blue one she will take after breakfast or right before combat class. On days she seems more anxious, she takes the blue one earlier.”

He keeps moving, crushing some of the pills as he adds and takes away substances from them. Dipping sticks of paper in them, and then pulling up Evie’s blood work on the screen as he works. Eventually, he must have all his answers because when he looks at me with his face pale as the white gloves he’s wearing, worry envelops me.

“Whoever has been messing with her, it’s been happening for a while.”

“What are these meds, Doc? And why is there not a single one of them in that huge ass book?”

I flipped through every page as he worked, so it doesn't surprise me when I look up and realize we've been in here all day.

“These are all forms of cannabis, MDMA, amphetamines, and other insane stimulants I can't even wrap my mind around. If I don't get her on a withdrawal program right the fuck now, she could have a seizure. In fact, I'm shocked she didn't when we gave her that week of sedation.”

He slams his fists onto the table, but the thump doesn't register in my ears. I reflect on how her moods would go from normal to anxious in a second, how she would be so wrapped up in her thoughts it was like she was high. And now we know why.

Someone was drugging her.

“Fuck,” I yell as I slam my own fist on the table. It dents in the center but I keep going. Suddenly, everything makes sense, and I feel like the biggest asshole on the planet. The girl I love was being drugged right under my nose, and I didn't even notice.

All her panic attacks, all the over-sensitized fear, all the instant responses, the little flinches, it all makes sense now. PTSD is normal after everything she's gone through, but the extreme ways in which she was forced to deal with it, having it thrown in her face every night because of these medications isn't right. *How could she even function with all of that in her system?* I've done drugs before and all I got out of it was an extreme sense of paranoia and anxiety.

Then it clicks.

We may have earned her trust, and she may have wanted to trust us, but someone was keeping her afraid, keeping her paranoid. Havoc told us she fought for us, but I didn't want to listen. Didn't want to hear her excuses because they only hurt me more. All I thought about was my own hurt.

I turn to Doc then, knowing exactly what I need to do. “I’ll tell her,” I say before walking out of the room. I have a huge fucking apology to make. I can only hope my little shadow can forgive me.



Chapter 5

Evie wakes up shaking and my first thought is that I wish Damien was here. Something about him not being with us makes it all feel so much worse. She's trembling as I reach for the bags she uses to throw up in when this happens. We move together like we both know the drill but the third time she goes for the bag, she loses it.

"He hates me," she gets out between ragged breaths. "I can't live like this. I don't want to need him, but I need him."

She's shaking much more violently now. It's been getting worse over the past two days, and now that it's escalated to this, I don't know what to do. The nurses are useless and tell her she just has to ride it out. Doc has been concerned but needed to see her meds to figure stuff out. Damien should

have gotten them to him this morning but it's well past midnight now, and I assume he's been hiding out.

I grab her face to try and help her center herself as I force her to look at me. "He doesn't hate you. He's hurt right now, and the hurt is overpowering that love. He still loves you, I promise you, Lucky Charm. He *loves* you."

Her eyes crease as I try to make my voice sound convincing because I do believe he still loves her, but he always feels too much and too deeply. I don't know if he will ever be able to forgive her.

As if our minds conjured him, Damien walks into the room followed by Doc, who has a syringe in his hand that he screws into part of Evie's IV as he nods at Damien and leaves. There's a long, tense silence as we look at him. I've never seen his tan skin so pale or his face so defeated. I get up the second I realize what's happening.

He needs her.

He practically falls into the bed beside her and even though I see her wince in pain, she pulls him closer. They fold into each other, fitting like the perfect missing puzzle pieces. Her IV gets tangled and without a word, I move to fix it, giving them their moment.

Damien sits up and cups her face in his hands more gently than he ever has before.

"I'm sorry," he chokes out. The gravity and weight in his words has my eyes welling with tears. You can hear it in every breath he takes that he will break if she doesn't forgive him.

Without question or hesitation, she looks him in the eyes and says, "I'm sorry too."

And just like that, it's like the whole universe shifts into place again. Just like that all of the Kings have their girl.

He sits up, wiping his face before settling in next to her. All the while he keeps his eyes on hers as if he's afraid she might disappear. "I need to tell you what we found."

She just rolls her eyes, but it seems like the shaking has started to settle. When she woke up screaming the first time, she thought I was Damien holding her. I have to admit, it hurt a little bit when her eyes fell in realization that it was me. I know better than to take it personally. I'm sure part of her thought all this was a dream for a moment. But it still hurt.

Now, she's settling into him and starting to look more relaxed than she has since she first woke up.

"Lay it on me, Sunshine. I think by now I'm over the surprises. There's a lot I don't know, so I'm just going to have to figure it out once we have all the pieces."

He nods at her with admiration sparkling in his eyes. "I'm so proud of you, Little Shadow," his voice breaks at the end, but he hides the tears welling in his eyes by kissing her on the forehead. He pulls back once the shine has faded. "You're medications, they were the problem. They've been causing your night terrors, your anxiety, and they are likely to blame for your lack of sleep and sense of panic as well. Doc tested them all and while some have components of antipsychotics, they are laced with other things too."

Evie doesn't even look phased. "Once I found out this was my uncle, I figured there was more," she says as she leans back into Damien's arm and closes her eyes. "I'm not really surprised since he's the one who set me up with all of those doctors. So much never lined up. Part of me wanted to think it was just because they were working for him so they wanted to get it over with for me, just force me to get past the trauma and hurt. That maybe, if I ignored it enough, it would just all go away. But honestly, you saying this makes more sense than anything else has in the last few days."

"Doc is making some medications for you that should help you detox off of all the drugs. That's what he just put in your IV. You're likely going through withdrawal already."

"That explains even more," Evie says sitting up. I know the second she opens her eyes, she's going to puke. I reach out for the bag but Damien gets it first, holding it for her with one hand and rubbing her back with the other.

The second she's finished, she looks relieved and her eyes start drooping. "You need to rest," I tell her. She's torn through her stitches a few times due to the heaving, but I don't see any blood start to pool up. She nods at me and then adjusts herself into Damien's side. His arm goes around her and my heart hurts.

I've been so mad at him. So angry with the words he used and the way he treated the whole situation. I could blame him for a lot of what happened. He was the one who wanted to punish her after we found out everything. But, if I'm honest, I don't think it would have changed much.

It doesn't mean I don't understand his anger or his hurt, it just means I don't feel like I can trust him with my feelings anymore if this is how he chooses to handle things when shit goes down.

I stand up and try to give them space. I need a minute to clear my head, and I don't know if I'm quite ready to be in the same room as Damien.

"Are you mad at me?" I hear him whisper as I get to the door. I freeze and take a moment to think about my response because 'mad' doesn't feel like the right word.

"I was never mad, D," I say as I turn to him. He's holding our girl so close, and she's already asleep. She needed him. Hell, we all needed him.

"Then what were you?" he asks, hesitantly.

"Hurt. Disappointed." I look down at my feet, not willing to see the look on his face as I say what I need to say. "You told me to feel, D. You told me to feel and that we would figure it out together. You promised. Then the second things went to shit, you went right to the bottle. You didn't talk, you wouldn't even hold my fucking hand. Then when she made it, when she pulled through after everything, you left."

I pause and let all my feelings hang in the air. If he wanted me to feel them, then he has to deal with what he did with them.

“None of us are mad at you, we are all just hurt. Hell, she woke up in a full panic attack and the only thing she could think about was how much you hate her. Not herself or what’s going on with her body. *You*. That’s who she’s wanted. *You* are who she’s needed every time she’s opened her eyes. And it gutted me, absolutely fucking gutted me that I had to be the one to tell her why you weren’t here, and then defend you.”

“I’m sorry, Lev, I’m so sor—” he says in a rush, trying to apologize for what he’s done, but I cut him off with my hand in the air.

“I’ll forgive you, D. I always do. But I can’t be in the same room as you right now. It’s your turn to be with her for a bit. Help convince her you’re not leaving so that maybe she doesn’t fall apart through all of this. I’ll work on putting more pieces together so we can figure out a plan with Alexi while you’re here with her.”

He tries to talk, but I just shake my head and leave. For three days I’ve had to deal with his sour attitude and brooding while also holding our girl in my arms and trying to do everything I could for her. I don’t plan to run out of here and dwell on all of this, but I can let myself feel it so I can find some fucking way to process it and where to go from here.

That mask that’s always just hovering above me, so ready to be slipped on so I can ignore it all. Ignore the pain, ignore the hurt, the confusion. All of it. It’s begging for me to pull it down and slip away.

But I won’t do it. I got mad at Damien for going straight to the bottle, I’d be a hypocrite if I went back to running away.

When I finally get outside, I feel like a week has passed since I’ve walked in the grass. Things are getting better, finally. We just have a giant ass puzzle to solve now. The cool night air helps me stay focused and awake, not even tempted to try and get some sleep.

I go to the suite and plan to collect Evie’s blades to bring them to her when I return to the hospital. I think having them by her side might help the panic a little, we just need to make sure she doesn’t stab any of us when she wakes up. She can be

such a violent little thing. Thankfully she hasn't been looking nearly as confused when she opens her eyes. It takes her a minute to see me, but I no longer have to work to bring her back to the present.

I do my best not to dwell on the fact that she was being drugged daily. I don't know if I have the capability to not lose my shit if I find out one more damn thing about her.

When I open the door, Alexi is sitting on the couch. His legs are spread wide, and a glass of whisky is dangling from one hand. He looks how I feel. Dark circles under his eyes and a permanent frown is etched into his face. I've never seen him look more like his father than he does right now. His white button-up shirt is sitting open at the top, sleeves rolled and scrunched up enough to show off some of his tattoos.

"How is she?" he asks immediately. He and Evie are on better terms now, but she didn't want him staying with her. I don't blame her because Alexi's empathy scale is about a zero out of ten, and he would have no idea how to help her through the panic. He would probably say something stupid like 'Just stop feeling this way'.

A small smile tugs at my lips just thinking about it. How she would likely hit him, and he would let her because he knows it's the wrong thing to say. I marvel at how well I know them and their dynamic already even though we have only been on the same page for a few days.

"D forgave her, he's with her in the room. She seems a lot better now that he's there." I tell him about the drugs and prevent him from throwing his glass across the room. I'm so tired of cleaning up messes. I survey the floors and notice all the blood is gone. The furniture is put back into place, and I realize that it must have been Damien to clean it all up. We didn't call for anyone to fix the mess.

"I think I have an idea, but she's not going to like it," Alexi says after he's calmed down.

"At this point, I don't think she will be too picky about our plans," I tell him, thinking about how defeated our girl looked. She's a fighter, but you can see it in her eyes that this is all

becoming too much. Her whole life has been a lie. Moving on is going to be an act of extreme will and faith.

“Oh, she is going to fight hard about this. But I want her to come home with us.” His expression is dead serious, but I still laugh. No way in hell would that ever happen.

“Yeah, okay I was wrong, she will be picky about that.”

Alexi shakes his head as he drops back into his seat, looking defeated. “I don’t know what else to do. How else do we keep her safe? The island isn’t safe, she can’t go home. Where could she go?”

He’s got a point. We take a while to sit and strategize about how to make this happen. I agree that she needs to come with us. It’s the only place we can make sure she’s safe. It makes sense why her plan to get to Boris was so in-depth, no one has ever successfully gotten a hit out on the head of the Suns Bratva.

“I just need to see her,” Alexi says around five in the morning. We think we have a few ideas to break the news but nothing is for certain, and Boris has to talk to her first if we are going to find a way for her not to go into a full panic over it because I am so over drugging her. So that’s not an option.

“Then go see her. D needs to shower anyway. I don’t know who he picked a fight with, but he had blood on his knuckles when he came in,” I say and decide to take a long hot shower myself. I’m positive I smell rancid after not leaving that bed for three days and sweating about as much as Evie every time she panicked.

Alexi leaves in a hurry and I go to shower. With the hot water running over me, I try to let the tension fall from my body as easily as the droplets fall to the floor. I take deep breaths and focus on the things I can control. I can choose what I eat before I go to bed. I can choose what I drink. I can choose what I’ll wear. I have some control, and the rest will figure itself out.

As I’m stepping out, I hear the door to the suite close. The hair on the back of my neck stands. My body always knows

when Damien is close, and although this is not my usual reaction to him, for once, my mind and body are in agreement that this is all too much. I find myself clenching my jaw hard enough to crack a tooth, and I slowly try to unwind the muscles that just seemed to find a way to relax. Except the more I try, every muscle in my body feels strung tight as a piano wire by the time I'm dry, and I don't think I can take it anymore.

Luckily, I don't think I have to. When I look up, Damien is standing in the doorway. "What are you doing in here? Is Alexi with Evie?" I question in an icy tone.

"Yeah, he sent me to try and fix this," he says as he waves his hands between us.

"I just told you," I say slowly, trying with everything I have to rein in the anger and hostility I'm feeling, "I don't want to be in the same room as you." Looking up at him, I hope he sees the pleading in my eyes. "Please. Leave."

But he just smirks in that casual Damien way of his, and I find my fist flying through the air like I'm no longer in control of the beast beneath my skin. I never let him out, but it seems he's done hiding.

Damien blocks my punch easily, but that's the thing when you feel. It doesn't just stop. It consumes you. Every neuron in my brain only has one job at the moment, and it's to fight.

I don't know how it happens but all too soon, we are grappling on my bathroom floor. I get on top of him and get a solid punch into his jaw as I straddle him. I pull back as he spits blood on the floor next to us, and I pause.

I don't want to hit him, that will never be enough for how I'm feeling. I want to use him. I want to punish him like he punished Evie. And I can see it in his eyes as our gazes lock, that's exactly what he needs too.

"Hit me again," he says, his eyes begging me to punish him. But I know Damien, and punishing him doesn't work. He needs to see it, *feel* it. It's the only way he can let it go.

I back off of him, and he makes no attempt to move. I stare down at him, my best friend, my broken lover, and it's at that moment, I know what we both need.

“Take your pants off,” I command him. His gaze flashes with a challenge. He might be the one in control most of the time, but every good Dom knows it's important to switch roles and explore the dynamics.

He sits up and slides them off, obeying even though it's obvious he doesn't really want to. When he attempts to stand, I put my hand on his head. “Oh no you don't, that's where you stay. You wanted to act like you're better than us, then you have to beg to get back on our level.”

He doesn't look up at me, but I see his shoulders sag in defeat. He knows what he said and did was wrong. This is how he will make up for it.

Slowly, I unwrap the towel around my waist, my cock hard as nails already after seeing Damien on his knees. If I thought I enjoyed the sight of Evie giving him the most punishing blowjob of his life, this is so much better.

Without asking, Damien takes my length in his hand. I know he knows just what to do, and that's the reason I give for the insane surge of precum that leaks from my dick.

My cock has been on the verge of exploding for days now. I attempt to convince myself it has nothing to do with Evie rubbing her ass against me in her sleep. And I refuse to admit that I almost came in my pants more than once when her hand slid over my piercing. I'm on edge and this is exactly what I need to get all this pent-up frustration out.

The tension in my body begs to be released. When Damien slides my cock into his mouth, circling the tip and flicking my piercing with his tongue, I let loose a pitiful moan. I watch him carefully as his lips tug up in approval, but this isn't for him to enjoy.

I thread my long fingers through his hair and force him to take every inch of me in one jerk. As more precum surges against the back of his throat, I hold him there for my

enjoyment. My pleasure. I want to erase the pressure the last few days have caused. I'm desperate to grab onto some sense of relief.

Damien sucks and licks, jerking his hand in the most delicious way that has my knees nearly buckling, but this isn't how I want to come. Right when I'm at the edge, I pull him off of me.

"Be a good boy and go get on the bed. I want you on your hands and knees and your head resting on the headboard."

He moves to stand, but I'm still holding him by the hair. "Crawl," I say, my voice showcasing just how serious I am. I'm not making this easy for him. If he fucks with our girl, he's going to grovel a little more than a quick lick of my dick.

For a moment, I think he's going to get up and tell me to go fuck myself. The hard set of his jaw tells me he might not be ready for what I'm about to do. But I know better, I know this man better than I know myself.

"Are you going to earn it? Are you going to be my good boy? Or am I going to have to tie you down like a bad one?" I repeat the threat he gave to Evie when it came to her punishment, knowing it will hit him. I have no issue tying him up and refusing to let him cum. Honestly, it's really what he deserves.

But then he sinks back down, and I watch as he lowers himself onto his hands and crawls to my bed. His ass swaying with each movement. I force myself to look away strictly because I will not let myself come right here solely because of how good that man's ass looks.

I take a moment to lean on the counter, letting him wait. I want him to sweat this out. I take a few deep breaths and calm my nerves. I've never done any of this before, but like the computer nerd I am, I'm also a researcher. I've read up on everything Damien enjoys after he shared his list of limits with me when this all started between us. I'm still working on mine, but I know one thing we are both willing to consent to.

Orgasm control.

When I walk into my room, I take a mental picture because I never want to forget this moment. Damien is full of my art. Only mine. I take a minute to walk around him, trailing my fingers down each piece I created, each scar I patched over. Now, it's his turn to patch over mine.

"Let's go over the rules," I begin, and he nods. "You will not come until I tell you to. You will not move unless I tell you to. You will not touch yourself without permission." I circle him again, wanting to build the anticipation of what I think will come to be my favorite part. "And when I allow it, once you've given me every drop of yourself, you will sit perfectly still and be perfectly silent as I continue to touch you. For however long I want."

He looks up at me then, and I finally see what I've been waiting for three days for. *Regret*.

"Do you consent?" I ask, giving him the freedom to negotiate.

After a moment, I see the determination. "Yes."

"What's your safe word, baby?" That's the most important thing I've read about. Everyone deserves an out. If this is too much, or becomes too much, I'll still forgive him. But I want to see what he can take.

"Vanilla," he says with a smirk.

I feel the corner of my lip lift in response. Fuck, this is exactly what we need.

I grab a bottle of lube from my drawer before getting on the bed behind him. The lube contains a warming agent that's amplified if you blow on it. As I admired Damien's body I saw how painfully hard his giant dick was.

I put a small amount of lube in my hand before reaching around to stroke him. He groans as my fingers play with his slit. I make sure to work all the way down, adding some of it to his balls as well. I lean down and kiss his back as he begins to pant heavily, his dick jerks in my hand.

"You like that, baby?" I ask him.

“Yes,” he says on a whimper that has my balls tightening.

Fuck he’s hot.

I continue to work him until his legs start shaking. “Please stop,” he begs. “I can’t..”

“You can do it, baby. You can take three more.” I slide my hand up and down his length in a tortuously slow drag. Once, twice, three times. Then, I let go.

His head falls heavily, and some of the tension begins to leave my body in response. I add more lube to my fingers before gradually dragging them between his perfectly toned ass. When I reach that tight hole, I shudder. I’ve never done this before, and I don’t want to fuck up with him.

He pushes his ass into my fingers and the tip slips in. I’m mesmerized, until... “I told you not to move. That’s ten seconds added to the post-orgasm torture.”

His body stiffens, even though I’m grateful he did it. It got me out of my head. But I want the control here, just for once I want some goddamned control.

I push my finger in, gently moving it around to find that spot that makes me lose my mind when he does it to me. When I find it, Damien’s breath hitches. It’s an alluring sound. One full of submission, eagerness, and trust. I watch in awe as I add another finger. He takes me so well that I reach around to reward him, stroking him in tandem with my thrusts. Once he’s nice and relaxed, I remove my fingers.

“On your back,” I order.

He moves quickly, giving me a beautiful view of his perfectly toned chest and abs. I wasn’t lying when I said he was the best piece of art I’ve ever created. He’s stunning.

“Hold your legs up,” I command. He reaches down, grabbing each muscular thigh and spreads them open for me. There is so much precum leaking from me that it’s almost free falling as tingles build at the base of my spine in response to this act of full submission. Instantly, my world stops, the stress disappears, our problems fly out the window, and it’s just the two of us.

Snapping back to reality, I quickly lube up my cock then bend down to blow on his. He arches his back up off the bed, nearly coming undone, and I have never been so satisfied with a purchase in my life.

“Fuckkkk,” he breathes as I hover above him. Our lips ghost over each other’s, almost touching, as we breathe in the same air. When I sit back and line my cock up with his tight ass, he groans.

I brace an arm above his head and lean down to his ear, nipping before I whisper, “Don’t leave me again, okay?” I need him to see how much it hurt, how lost I felt when he turned his back on all of us.

“I won’t,” he promises, and I can hear in his voice just how much he means that.

I push into him as our lips crash together, and we both let out a moan of approval. He’s so fucking tight I could cry. It’s a painful and yet blindingly euphoric feeling as I pump myself in and out of his body. My jaw is slack, the tension from earlier long gone. All that’s left in its place is this bliss.

“Shit, D. I never knew it could feel this good.”

I move so the head of my piercing rubs that spot inside him, and his body goes tight.

“Lev, I’m gonna come,” he says, voice strained.

“Don’t do it, baby. I’m almost there. Wait for me, fall with me.”

His eyes snap open, locking with mine and I watch as he concentrates. Then, I slowly drag my gaze down to where our bodies meet. I watch as my cock disappears in his ass, and *I know* I’m not going to last long.

Sitting back to take one of his legs in my arm, I thrust as deep as I can get. “You gonna keep my cum in here when I give it to you?” I ask him. I imagine him holding it in for me and my eyes nearly roll back at the thought.

“Yes.”

“Ask me for it, beg me for it,” I say, barely holding on.

“Give it to me, please. I need it. I need your cum.” His nails scrape down my back, and I shudder. “Please.” It’s hardly a whisper.

I can feel it building in both of us, the air seems to grow thick as we both gasp for breath, smothering ourselves in the lust and love we have for one another, holding on for that moment that makes new light flash behind our eyes.

“Do it. Come with me, D.” I reach for his cock, pumping him in my hand as I come inside him, rubbing my piercing over that special spot again and again. As I come, it seems to only heighten the feeling for Damien, my cock pulsing my cum right over his prostate. His whole body is shaking as he erupts in my hand. He thrusts up into it as I still myself deep inside him.

As he comes, I gather up the slickness in my hand and continue to move up and down on his shaft, keeping my dick firmly planted in his ass. I pull his leg tight to me to prevent him from jerking away.

When I reach seven seconds, tears well up in his eyes. I don’t know if it just hurts that bad or if it’s everything coming to him at once. “Where are you, D? Can you take it, baby?”

He doesn’t look at me, just nods his head as I reach ten seconds. By fifteen, the tears let loose, and I need to hear him say it. “Use your words, baby, you gonna make it?”

He locks his jaw, and his thigh is trembling in my grip as his hands fist the sheets. “I got this,” he says, although he doesn’t sound confident.

When I reach twenty seconds I truly don’t know if he can take the next ten. I slow my movements slightly but keep up the pressure. At twenty-five he tries to pull away and I let him.

“You’re almost there, baby. You can do this. Stay still for me.” His jerking becomes almost violent, and it’s delivering me my own form of torture as he moves with me still inside him. But watching him squirm like that under me is the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever witnessed from him.

Three. Two. One left. He makes eye contact with me as I give him the final stroke and as soon as I release him, he begins to cry. Not just the tears like earlier. He lets it all out. The hurt he's been feeling, the sting of betrayal, the consequences of his actions.

I pull out of him slowly before laying next to him and cocooning him tightly in my arms. He turns to bury his face in my chest, and my heart finally stops aching so damn much.

He's letting it go.

After a few minutes he stops, but his arms don't loosen around me. I kiss his forehead and use my fingers to tilt his face up to mine. The kiss is soft and sweet, a reminder that no matter what happens, I will still love him. And just like he knew I needed space after our first go at this, I know he's the exact opposite.

"I'll be right back," I tell him as I slip free from his hold. His arms fall to the bed, seeming to have no energy left in his body as he stares off into space.

First, I go to the kitchen and grab us some water and a bag of beef jerky for D. Then, I head to the large bathtub and fill it with warm water and lavender Epsom salts. I light a few candles so the harsh lights can be turned off, then I go and get the man I love from my bed.

He looks like he's nearly asleep but when I take his hand in mine, he pushes up on his own. No words are spoken as I guide him to the tub and support him while he steps in. He sinks back and for a second, I think about getting between his legs. But the most important part about playing the role of a Dom is having the ability to see what your partner needs, and Damien needs me.

I grab a bottle of massage oil and move him so I can slide in behind him. Water splashes over the edges of the tub as we find our place, him in my arms for a change. I put some of the oil in my hands and begin to rub circles into his shoulders. His breathing seems to regulate, and I pass him a water bottle. He drinks it all greedily, so I give him another. When he finishes with that, I pass him the beef jerky.

He tears into the bag without a word. When he's finished and I'm done rubbing the knots from his shoulders, I pull him to my chest and wrap my arms around him.

"Thank you," he says in a soft whisper. "I didn't know what to do."

He sounds defeated, and I'm sure he feels like it too. So I tell him what he needs to hear.

"I forgive you, and I love you," I say as I turn him in my arms so he can see in my eyes how much I mean it. Tears form in his again, but he holds them back as he regains his strength.

I help him out of the bath when the water starts to turn cold. I take my time drying him, appreciating every beautiful curve of muscle he has. I pat his hands dry carefully before getting some cream to apply to the split knuckles. We are both practically crawling into bed by the time we finish.

Damien turns to face me, kissing my cheek and whispering in my ear, "I love you too." before his eyes succumb to the exhaustion.

As I drift off, I feel like maybe, just maybe things are about to get a little better. Only to be very wrong when I wake up.



Chapter 6

Approaching Evie's room, I find Havoc standing guard by the door. I still don't know how this fucker managed to escape the shed, but he clearly has no intentions of going anywhere and he only adds extra eyes on our girl. Damien is still in there with Evie, so I decide to set some boundaries with this man before things go further.

"We need to talk," I say in a hushed tone as I approach, not wanting to wake Evie if she's managed to fall asleep.

"I'm not leaving. You can talk right here," Havoc says.

I roll my eyes at his dramatics as I respond. "The island is still on lockdown, and we are just going to the room next to hers."

He looks around at the nurses skeptically but eventually relents. The man looks like a mess in a tank top and jeans. His hair is disheveled, and he clearly hasn't slept much since he arrived two days ago.

We walk into the room and the second I shut the door, I turn on him. All the pieces fell into place the moment we found out about the tracker, but I need to know how much Havoc found.

“Is everything you said true? He set her up to fail the challenge?” Just the thought that we didn't earn the title we've been given makes my jaw clench. I ball my fists, trying to count as my perfectly manicured nails dig into the palm of my hand because I know the answer before the words ever leave his lips.

“Yes.”

It's all I need to lose control at the moment. I've been on edge for two days now. She hasn't let me back in to touch her or hold her since she first woke up. So, just the thought that everything that happened during her challenge was a setup has me breaking down. I turn and hit the wall with so much force I feel my knuckles crack under the pressure.

Havoc doesn't move, doesn't even flinch. His face is hard and cold, like just the thought of what I'm angry about doesn't even scratch the surface of the things her uncle has done to her. But I need to know.

“What else?” I reluctantly ask as I shake out my hand and pin him with a furious glare.

He sighs, rubbing a hand down his face while he tries to rein in his control. “I didn't get a lot of time to dig everything up. I was so disgusted once I found out the truth about the man I pledged my life to serve that I had to get out of there. As soon as I went down the rabbit hole, I knew I needed to get to her right away. I found the tracker and a few files. I found out he sent her to the prison to be tortured and not our own men. I found out he had been lying to all of us for quite some time. The depths of which I'm not even sure I want to know.”

I nod in response, and he shakes his head. “He sent her there?” I question, knowing only part of the story from Damien. He wouldn’t tell me everything, saying it was her choice to trust me with it or not. But he told me enough. Enough to have me thankful I didn’t eat breakfast with the nausea that set in.

“He did. It was insane how he made me feel like it was this crazy rescue mission when he said he finally found her. But I found out he owed a debt to the prison guards and when they didn’t return her after the third week as agreed upon, that’s when he started planning to kill them all. I have no idea if his intention was even to get her out. I remember him being more focused on making sure they were all dead than picking up the nearly lifeless girl tied down to their torture table. At the time I thought it was just him being so angry at them for hurting her, but now I’m starting to see everything for what it really was”

My hand is numb from the pain of hitting the solid wall and when I move to do it again, Havoc stops me.

“I know you’re angry,” he says, and I open my mouth to yell because that’s all I can do. But before I can, his grip tightens around my arm, keeping my attention firmly on him. “But *this*, this is the last thing she needs. Focus on what you can do right now. Nothing more. And the main thing you can do is go to her and vow to keep her safe. I see your love for her, and it’s stronger than any weapon she will ever carry because I know you will stand in front of every threat that comes for her. But this,” he gestures to the wall I was about to hit, “this will only bring you both pain. And I think you’ve suffered through enough. So has she.”

I have no words for him. He is right.

I think about her laying in that bed, then allow myself to recall what she looked like as they wheeled her into surgery, how gray her skin was. I focus on it because she doesn’t need to see us fall apart. She needs to know that we can pick up those pieces and help her feel strong again.

I straighten myself and when Havoc sees I’m not going to hit the wall, he lets go and takes a step back. I don’t know

many men that would have helped me when I get in that head space, so seeing that he doesn't know me at all makes me pause.

"Thank you," I say as I adjust my shirt.

"You remind me a lot of myself, I won't let you make the same mistakes I did with her. I lost my family because of my anger. Don't let it happen to you too."

All I can do is nod. I won't let anything happen to her. But I can't find the right words to say. So I do what I do best. I get to work.

"You can stand guard at her door, but you have to get some rest first." He tries to argue but I hold up my hand to silence him. I might have let him take control for a moment, but now that it's over, it's time to get shit back on track here. "There is a room down the hall with two beds. Take it. There is a shower as well, which you need by the way." He smells like salt water and sweat, and the nurses out there don't need him stinking up the place. He turns to sniff himself and doesn't argue. "One of us will be with her at all times, so you can rest and we will come up with a better alternative tomorrow if Evie is feeling better. In order to help her through this and come up with a plan, we're going to need her input and for that, we need her better. We need everyone well rested as well so go."

He doesn't argue, and I thank the demon god himself because I have no more energy to fight. I just need my princess.

I slide open the door to her room and see Damien holding her while she sleeps.

"Lev needs you," I tell him softly, careful not to wake Evie. Lev clearly wanted to run away when I was leaving, and I could see how much he needed an outlet. He might not want to see Damien right now, but he needs him. Hell, they need to fix what's broken between them before Evie gets out of here. I'm not letting her come back to a place of tension and hostility.

Damien doesn't look up from Evie's face, a frown etched into his brow. I already know he knows how much he messed

up. I don't plan on making it worse, but I do want to make one thing very clear.

"If you go to liquor like that again, I will personally lock you in the dungeons," he looks up at me then so I continue, "and I won't hesitate to throw you back into a program. I know you only said what you said because you were hurt, but that can't happen again. Not with *her*."

I repeat the same words he said to me when I snapped with the email.

"She's not just yours," he said, shoving a finger in my chest, "and we won't let you have her if you keep this shit up. I know you did what you did because you were hurt, but that can't happen again. Not with her."

"I know," he finally responds. "It won't."

He stands up so I carefully slide into the bed to replace him. Evie's eyes flutter open and I think she's going to tell me to leave. But she takes one look at my mess of an appearance and instead curls into my chest as I lay back next to her. Damien watches her closely before leaving, and I hope like hell he and Lev can fix what was broken between them.



I watch her face as she sleeps curled into me. The bruises are starting to turn a dark shade of yellow, and the swelling in her face is nearly gone. She hasn't eaten much, but the fluids they are giving her seem to keep her healing even without the food. I know if it were a real issue Lev would make them do something to fix it. The guy reads her medical charts like he's a lawyer looking for something to sue someone over.

I keep thinking about Havoc's words and how she's going to cope with all of this moving forward. How she's still here with us I will never understand. She's so fucking strong.

Evie's hand moves up my chest, "Please stop thinking so loud." she whispers. My mouth tugs in a grin because I fully believed she was dead ass asleep.

I take her hand in mine, the freshly changed gauze catching on a few calluses and rubbing against the three-day-old stubble of my chin as I kiss the back of it. Her hands are so small compared to mine, but the fight within them is immeasurable.

“I can’t help it, you give me a lot to think about.”

She groans as she rolls over and winces slightly at the change of position. I grab the button for the medication, but she just shoves it away.

“Prin...” I start, but she cuts me off.

“I’ll take it if I need it, but I don’t want to need it. They’ve been drugging me for years, and I’m ready for this shit to leave my system.”

That’s when I notice her shaking slightly. I know Doc put her on a detox protocol, and the fact that she woke up not trapped in a nightmare is proof of it working. I could shake the devil’s hand in thanks because I would have had no idea what to do if she had. But I don’t like seeing her like this. She’s so fucking strong that seeing her even in this bed is nearly unbearable. I’m sure she feels the same way.

“We need to start talking and come up with a plan for moving forward. Want to get out of this room today and help us strategize?”

Her eyes light up with the hope of leaving in an instant, making her sit up more quickly than she should. I see the pain written all over her face, but I don’t comment. She doesn’t need a babysitter, she needs someone to remind her who she is.

“Really? Do you already have a plan? Because I know Alexi Mikhaus has not been sitting around for the past three days sulking and not coming up with a plan.”

I give her a genuine smile for a moment just before I realize what I’m going to have to tell her. She notices the change instantly and her guard is up before I can give a single reassuring word. Fuck, she just let me in, and I’m already being shoved out again. I can feel it.

“We think,” I start.

“We?”

“Lev and I think you should come home with us for the break.”

She scoffs at that. “No way in fucking hell am I getting anywhere near your father without him explaining himself.” Her voice grows as she keeps speaking. “Actually, no, fuck that. He doesn’t get to explain. He hunted me, Alexi. *Hunted*. You have no idea what that’s like, that feeling of what someone will do to you when they finally catch you. I know you guys believe this is all some big misunderstanding, but I spent the last ten years of my life running from and hating this man. That doesn’t go away in a few days. Fuck, it might never go away. So, no. NO!”

When she yells, I clench my fist and fight my demon back to keep him from putting a collar on her throat, dragging her to my home, and chaining her to my bed. I count. Carefully and slowly as she stares in wait to see my reaction.

This is not who I want to be. This is not who I will be with her.

When I finally release my hand and relax my fingers, I move to touch her but she pushes me away. “Don’t touch me.”

I get up off the bed, needing to pace. I thought we were past this. I thought we had finally moved the fuck past this. “Look,” I say, trying to keep my breaths even. “I thought you could see it now, see how much I want you. I thought you understood how much I want to protect you and I can’t fucking do that if you’re not with me. This island isn’t safe and you can’t exactly go home. So what the fuck are you going to do?”

Angry tears burn in her eyes as her face turns red because she knows I’m right. She fists her hand in the sheets, and I see her monitor kick up with her heart rate. “I don’t trust him,” she seethes. “I hardly trust you after what just happened. How do I know this isn’t all a trap just to get me there, with *him*?”

I see her point, I do, but my blood is running so damn hot I can’t control my words anymore. *She won’t let me touch her.*

“If you think I’d let you walk into a trap, after everything that’s happened over the past three days, then there’s nothing I can do or say at this moment to change your mind. So if you won’t come, then you better prove to us you can stay here and defend yourself.”

She scoffs again, and I’m nearly trembling in rage. *How does she get me this upset?*

“I can defend myself just fine,” she says bitterly.

“Oh yeah?” I question. “Then stand up, Evie. Stand up and walk to the bathroom by yourself so I know, at the very least, you could hide if someone came here uninvited.” My tone is cold and uncaring as I gesture to the bathroom. “Walk the fuck over here all on your own, and I’ll let it go.”

She hasn’t gotten up to pee once by herself, and I know firsthand just how unstable she is from the withdrawal and the injuries. I, myself, have taken her to the bathroom three times during the night. But this girl is as stubborn as they come. She straightens her spine and throws her legs over the edge, grimacing in pain the whole damn time. She stands up straight but can only keep up the farce for about two steps until she’s clutching her side and falling to her knees.

“Dammit,” I say as I reach for her.

The moment my hand makes contact with her shoulder, she flinches. She fucking flinches and pushes back away from me. I’m frozen, watching her trip over herself to scramble away from my hand. I don’t hear her yelling. I don’t register Damien walking in and glaring at me. I stand there frozen in time as my heart breaks all over again.

Damien picks her up, and she doesn’t flinch from his touch at all, just melts into him as her body is overtaken with tears and shaking. Doc comes in and gives her something in her IV before leaving again without a word. I’m not sure I could hear it even if he did.

When he closes the door again, Damien’s eyes are on mine. They’re no longer angry like they were when he walked in. “She’s having a flashback, it’s not you.”

I punished her, forced her, and broke her down until she was a shell of a person and Lev and Damien did everything in their power to bring her back and keep her safe. She doesn't need me. All I do is bring her fear and pain. No matter how hard I try.

"Lex," Damien calls after me as I leave, "it's not you."

As the door slides shut behind me, I look down at my hands, the shaking even worse than Evie's.

It is me.



Chapter 7

Alexi is making me take a damn shower, and while I can tell that I need it, I also don't feel ready to leave E's door. I've already messed up so many times. I should have known all this was going on. Adrik basically had me stalking the girl since the moment we grabbed her. I never had a problem with it because I always believed it was out of a need to keep her safe, but now I see just how possessive it all was. How controlling he was about her movements but wanting to pretend like he wasn't limiting her so instead, he would create fear of being anywhere that he wasn't aware of.

I'm still mentally kicking myself when I push into the room at the end of the hall. I close the door behind me and flick on the lights when a flash of blonde perks up on one of the two beds. I jerk back in surprise.

“Shit,” I say as I startle. Laney rolls her eyes at me in response.

“Is Evie okay? What are you doing in here?”

I take in her red eyes and puffy cheeks. I heard her tell E the truth and when she left the room with tears in her eyes, something in my chest almost broke to go after her, but I couldn't leave E.

“What are *you* doing in here?” I repeat her question back to her. I was told to use this room, so I'm not leaving. I look around for a change of clothes and find some adjustable scrubs in one of the drawers and decide they will have to do.

“I just needed to be close to her without her knowing I was close,” Laney tells me quietly.

I ignore the tears that stream down her face because that pain looks too familiar. “I'm guessing you told her and it didn't go well?” Her tears stop.

“No it didn't go well, but you know that. Don't act like you weren't across the hall the whole damn time.” She huffs in annoyance as she folds her arm across her impressive tits, pushing them up into her face. I do everything I can not to stare at them as I reply.

“How did you know I was there?”

This time she finally lets the facade drop and lays back on the bed. “I'm not an idiot, and I have an oddly impressive sense of smell. And you reek.” She turns on the bed to look at me. “Plus, the curtains in the rooms don't go all the way to the ground. Your boots are fairly distinctive.”

Holy shit, this girl is impressive. “Why didn't you say anything?” I ask.

“I knew you weren't going to hurt her and frankly, I don't want to be the reason anyone gets sent to the dungeon, so I just let it go and I figured Alexi would catch you soon enough anyway.”

I want to thank her, but I would rather make her feel better instead. “She might be upset, but she didn't kill you. You have

to know that with her, that means you're already halfway to forgiveness."

She shakes her head and returns to staring at the ceiling. "I don't deserve her forgiveness."

"Listen," I say as I sit on the bed beside her, "E has been hurt a lot. She's been lied to her whole life. But you did the one thing most of us don't have the backbone to do. You told her the truth. You confessed *and* you apologized. There isn't anything more you can do right now. So you lying here, wallowing in self-pity, that's not going to help anyone."

I'm a fully trained assassin. I've been killing people for over twenty-eight years, and I have never once been caught. But when Laney jumps out of the bed and shoves those stupid cat ears between my ribs, and straddles me before I can blink, I don't think I've ever been so impressed, scared, and turned the fuck on all at the same time ever in my life.

"Listen here, Havoc, I don't know who you think I am but if you think that is what I'm doing, then you're fucking delusional. I came in here to sleep AND be close just in case anyone tries to hurt my best friend. Yeah, there have been a few tears. But crying is nothing I will ever let anyone, let alone a heartless assassin, make me believe makes you less than. I'm *not* wallowing!"

I stare at her in utter disbelief, afraid that if I move a muscle her fancy weapon will puncture a lung, or that she might feel the insane hard-on I'm rocking right under her cotton panties.

She steps down off the bed, removing herself from the danger zone that is my aching dick right now as she continues to speak. "I've also been trying to come up with a plan. I had just turned the lights out to take a short nap before I went and told the guys some of my ideas, assuming she hasn't told them what I did and they don't want to kill me. But even if they do, at least I can give them a decent plan to follow before they put my butt in the ground."

At the mention of her ass, my eyes drop to it, and she notices. "Really?" she deadpans with one eyebrow cocked up.

“I was just looking to see if it was an ass worthy of keeping above ground.” I glance at it again before I smirk and say, “They can’t put something that fine in the ground.”

I watch as her cheeks turn red, and I don’t know if it’s from embarrassment or being turned on, but I sure as hell can’t remember the last time I was this fucking hard. I don’t move out of sheer will because I’m determined not to let her see it.

She sits down on the bed across from me and some of the tension lessens in my body. “So, what’s this brilliant plan you’ve come up with while you’ve been sitting in here *not* wallowing?”

She stares daggers at me but as I look at the rainbow of pink on her, all I can think of is how much she reminds me of a damn unicorn. She’s all the colors at once; fierce, bright, and blinding. But she has all the ferocity that comes with a beast with a horn that could impale the strongest of metals. It’s equally as terrifying as it is beautiful. *Just like her.*

“I’ve been keeping tabs on everything happening, and I think that she needs to get somewhere safe. I overheard you and Alexi talking,” she barrels over me as I try to ask if she was stalking me and keeps going, “and I know she has a tracker. I’m assuming it’s a sophisticated one. So first, we need someone to volunteer to be her decoy. Do her normal thing on the island, stay up with her routine for a while so that we have time to get Evie out of here. Knowing Alexi, he’s going to want to take her to Russia. Evie will fight him on that, but I have a strong feeling he’s going to get his way because it actually makes the most sense. While she’s safe there, we can work out what we are going to do next.”

I hadn’t thought about the tracker and how we can use that to manipulate Adrik and get more time. If it’s crushed or destroyed, then he would know and he would also assume I made it here to save her. But, if we can keep the curtain over his eyes until she’s somewhere safe, then maybe that could work. The problem is, nowhere is really safe for her.

“That’s a decent idea,” I tell her, not wanting to give away the fact that my plan was to rip the tracker out, crush it, and

send a big fuck you to the man that I trusted as my leader and friend for the past twenty-three years.

“Thanks,” she says, standing up and throwing her hair in a ponytail.

“Where are you going?” I ask her.

She takes a deep breath before straightening her spine. “To talk to Nessa.”



Chapter 8

“I’ve been thinking,” my father says as I step out of the hospital building. My body feels numb after everything that just happened. I don’t know how to fix it, and I don’t really know if there’s even a point. All I’ll ever do is hurt her.

I look up at my father, and he must notice how much I’m not in the mood for his shit. “Alright, I’ll just cut to the chase then. If you want to share her then that’s up to you. I’ll support you. But I want you back in my life again. I want to try to be...” He looks down then, something he hardly ever does. It shows defeat and submission. “Better?”

“Are you just saying that so you will get your way?” I ask, needing to know if this is all just some messed up way to get me to marry Evie.

“Not at all.” He walks up to me then and I’m able to see the exhaustion pulling at him too. “I’m not going to pretend that I like it or that I have any control over it whatsoever, but if this is what you want, I’ll stand by you. Lev said something to me yesterday and I think he had a point. I don’t want to keep making the same mistakes, and I definitely don’t want you to end up making my mistakes either. So, what can I do?”

He’s offering me an olive branch, so I take it. He needs to make Evie believe he’s telling the truth. He needs to make us all believe it.

“You have to tell her the truth, all of it. And you have to let her come home with us for the break. I’ve already had it worked out that we will all leave in three days. Evie should be better then and able to move to oral medications. The break will last four weeks. Two weeks for her to heal and two more for her to get her strength back. I don’t know where we will go from there, but that’s for her to say. She can come back here or go on the run from her uncle. I don’t really care, but I need you to understand that wherever she goes, we all go too.”

He nods without missing a beat. “I can do that, son. I can do that for you. We will find a way to make this work.”

“I need a nap and a shower. I also need to eat and check on Lev, so we will go talk to Evie later tonight. I plan for us all to meet in the morning to come up with a plan that we can let her be part of, so I need you to have her convinced by then.”

He pats me on the back. “Message me when you want to go talk to her. I won’t go near her until you give me the green light.”

I eye him warily. He’s not normally this agreeable, but maybe for once, he actually does feel bad about ignoring me for the past nine years. I don’t have the energy to fight him or question his motives or go over a plan. I don’t even know if I have the energy to make it back to the suite. I put my hand on his shoulder, hoping he understands the gravity of the words I’m about to speak.

“Thank you.”



Chapter 9

I'm still shaking, but I can finally tell what is what. When Alexi mentioned forcing me to go home with his father, it was like every nightmare of mine had come to life. All those nights of dreaming about him finding me, kidnapping me just to torture and kill me flooded my mind and I couldn't tell if I was seeing Alexi or Boris. My eyes still feel foggy, but I blame that on all the tears and the fact that I'm apparently withdrawing from a slew of drugs.

Damien doesn't let me go. Each time I slip in and out of consciousness, he's holding me just as tight as the last. Him forgiving me was all I needed to know these men were it for me. The problem is, though, I don't really know who I am anymore. I don't know what I want or need. I don't even know what I want my name to be.

That's the funny thing. You search your whole life for the truth, wanting it, craving it. You seek revenge, and then it all gets taken away from you with just a few words.

Fuck my uncle. Fuck. Him.

The frustration and helplessness finally gives way to all of the damn anger, and I swear it's like a dam breaks in my soul. This time when the shaking starts, it's for a whole new reason.

"Shhhh, Little Shadow, it's alright. I'm here. You're safe," Damien whispers, trying to ease the ache put in my heart from finding out that everything I've known for the past eleven years was a lie.

"Am I?" I question him. I need him more than ever to just lie. I'm not someone who needs people, but since he started waking up with me with the night terrors, I realized I don't know if I could ever really let him go. And now that we've all been tied so closely together with everything that's happened, I don't know how to picture a life without all three of them in it. However long that may last.

I push myself to sit up in his arms so I can face him. "This is where you tell me he's right, isn't it? That you tell me I don't have a choice, that it's the only option."

Damien cups my face in his hand and touches our foreheads together. "We will always give you a choice. You have a choice, but I think you know we aren't above badgering you until you make the right one," he says with his usually smug grin I've come to love.

I huff a laugh at that because he's right. If Damien knows how to do anything, it's how to get his way with his stupid smirk and puppy eyes. It's pathetic. *I love it.*

"I don't know how to learn to trust anyone else right now. How can I trust Boris? How can I trust that this all isn't some trap he set up?" I ask, needing him to tell me how to move forward because I'm so damn stuck right now.

"You don't have to trust him, Little Shadow. You just have to trust us. Trust that Alexi knows his father and wouldn't make this decision lightly. Trust that after almost losing you

once, Lev would rather rip his own heart out of his chest and offer it to you before he ever went through that again. And trust that these hands,” Damien lays his hands in my lap like an offering, “they will never turn their back on you again. They’re yours. You said you wanted my monster, that you once believed he would protect you. He’s yours, I’m yours. I will fight for you with every ounce of strength I have until the very end.”

Fuck, why am I so damn emotional? I chalk it up to the withdrawal as I angrily wipe away the tears streaming down my face, and as if reading my mind, Damien confirms my suspicions with a light smile.

“Withdrawal can make you sensitive. It’s okay to cry.”

It bothers me that it feels like he’s speaking from experience, and he doesn’t even give me a second to ask before offering me another truth. One I feel like I haven’t earned.

“A few months before we arrived, I went on a bender. My father was unbearable, life felt empty and hollow, like it no longer had a point. I was so sick of it all and I finally tried to give up. I thought maybe if I drowned in the liquor then at least it would be my choice and not his. Alexi found me and forced me into a program. I started talking to his therapist.”

When I look at him in shock that he has any idea about Alexi’s issues, he just grins. “Yeah, I know about that. He thinks he can hide his shit, but I’ve seen him go into the office, and I’ve also seen him grow from someone who would choke a man to death with his bare hands for ruining his schedule, to someone who can walk away from a random girl slicing his hand open. I figured he wasn’t just talking through his issues.”

“Did you know that’s why he took my doors?” I question.

“Not at first, but when he wouldn’t tell us, I figured you must have found something along those lines.”

I nod in understanding and he continues. “Anyway, I got to see his therapist and she really helped me look at the world differently. She helped me figure out how to gain my bearings when it came to the withdrawal. I cried all the time in front of

her. She helped me see that it wasn't a sign of weakness at all, but instead, it was a way to work through the hurt and the pain. She also suggested a lot of things that are part of the BDSM lifestyle to help me cope. Alexi and I both are deep in this world, and it surprisingly helps us through a lot of our issues. You should read up on it. If you decide to stick around us, you're going to need it."

"That sounds really helpful. I haven't had the same experience. I've only ever been told to use the anger and pain to fuel my drive for vengeance. I think that's why the cutting gets so bad sometimes." I move my hand to my leg where stitches patch up the three lines I carved into my leg to try to forget these men. They are barely scabbed over now, but I think they are going to scar, and I suddenly regret it. I never want to remember that day or those feelings ever again.

The shaking only gets worse no matter what I do, and Damien presses the button for pain medication. I want to be angry, but I know it helps take the edge off, and he's probably exhausted. I have no idea what time it is in here, but I'm so damn ready to get out of this bed.

"Do you think I can go outside?" I ask. I know I have a few meds pumping through me, but I need to get out of this room before I go crazy.

"If it's what you want, I dare someone to stop me from taking you." And this is why I love this man. The light chuckle I give him is the first one that feels good.

"This is why I love you," the words slip past my lips before I even think to stop them, and his body freezes. It's the truth, I love him. I wanted to tell him the first time he fucked me, but I was too afraid and confused as to what the feeling was exactly. Now, since I don't know if I'm going to live to see Christmas, I don't take the words back. He needs to know I forgive him, and he needs to know how I feel.

His gaze slowly tracks over to mine, and I attempt to prepare my heart for him to be unable to say it back. I don't want him to say it unless he really feels that way, and I sure as hell don't want this moment to turn into one of pity so I

quickly change the subject and give him an out. “You might need to ask the nurses to help you unhook this stuff from the wall.”

“Don’t,” is all he says, still frozen. My face scrunches up in confusion, but he pinches my chin between his fingers and gets close. “Don’t say that unless you really mean it. Unless you’re really ready to accept all of me. I’m not perfect, I will make mistakes. I will get angry sometimes, and I will never be able to make up for what I did to you.”

He searches my eyes but I just smile, showing him that I understand. I don’t want someone perfect. I don’t want someone who doesn’t know how to mess up and grow from it. I don’t want someone who runs away from danger. This is the man I love. He’s a little bit crazy and a hell of a mess, just like me. So I show him just how much I mean it.

I take the hand that’s holding my chin and thread our fingers together while I look him in the eyes. “I love you, Sunshine. You’re mine, and I want everything that comes with that.”

I don’t have time to process that he’s kissing me until the pain hits. I swear he moved so fast that before I could blink, he was on top of me as our teeth crash together. The tang of blood hits my mouth from my lip being split back open, and I moan over the taste. I don’t want soft and sweet. I want Damien.

I kiss him back as best as I can while I’m being crushed under him until the pain in my side becomes too much. I shift as I let out a soft cry, and he immediately moves off of me.

“I’m sorry, fuck, baby, I’m sorry I just,” I silence him by pulling him to lay down by my side so I can kiss him again. His hand threads through my tangled hair carefully as he cups half my head in his palm, and I throw my leg over him. I let myself get lost in the feeling of his passion and strength.

When we pull away, he’s staring at me with glassy eyes and I can’t help but wonder what he’s thinking.

“I... I love you too. And it scares the shit out of me,” he says so softly I almost think I imagined it. His eyes say it all

though so I hold them as I stroke his untrimmed beard with my fingers.

“It’s okay to be scared. I’m fucking terrified of what’s going to happen next. You’re the one who told me fear is what protects us, drives us, and you’re a very talented driver.”

He grins at me and the concerned look on his face melts away. He loves me, Lev loves me, and I love them both so much it almost hurts.

I think there’s room for Alexi too, but I’m not willing to admit that to him yet. He may have been right about what needs to happen, but I’m not ready to tell him that.

“Let’s get you outside, Little Shadow, the moon has been calling your name.”



We make it outside with all of the portable machines hooked up to two different poles on my wheelchair, but Damien doesn’t seem to mind pushing it around. When I take in the moon, the tears come back again. Not because anything is wrong, but because for the first time in almost four days, I feel like I’m small in the world again.

The room I’ve been stuck in is suffocating, and the only orbit I can seem to find is one of tragedy and pain. But out here, with the moon and the stars shining brightly on the patio, the tears fall in relief. Silent in the sound of the waves and the wind and even though it’s a little cool, it feels like I can finally fill my lungs to the brim with real air.

Damien locks the wheels and pulls up a chair beside me as we look out at the waves rolling in the night. It’s so beautiful, and I promise to myself right then that I’ll never take the beauty in the world for granted again.

The door behind us opens and Lev comes out, finally looking rested and clean. My heart eases at the sight. He pulls up a chair to hold my hand, then slides my blades into my lap. I take them out of the sheath one by one and let the cool steel and weight of them center me. I may not be able to walk, and

my hand might hurt like a bitch, but at least I have something to defend myself with if anyone comes knocking. I squeeze Lev's hand and pull him close for a kiss, tears stinging the backs of my eyes with how much this meant to me, and as we pull away and he wipes a tear that falls with his thumb, I know he knows it too.

It's an amazing feeling because now that I know the truth about the world I feel like for once I can finally see in front of me. It's not cloudy or covered in pain and regret, but utterly clear with a promise of a new life somewhere, if I can only find the right path.

After a while, when the sun is starting to rise, Alexi comes out. I stiffen because this means we are going to have to talk. I've thought a lot about what happened, and I know I reacted poorly. The visions of being trapped again got to me, and I let them take over instead of fighting back and going to the man who finally gave me a piece of himself.

He walks around us and sits on the ground in front of my chair. He doesn't speak, so I allow myself to soak in the moment before getting to the hard part. I glance at the lazy smile on Damien's face, knowing he feels proud for giving me this moment. Then I look at Lev and see him relaxed and content while holding my hand in his. He's gentle, unlike the way the moon hits all the sharp points on his face. He's my ghost and in the moonlight, I swear he looks a bit like one too.

Then I look down at Alexi, casually dressed in sweats and a hoodie. He looks exhausted. And for the first time, he looks scared. I know he's afraid for me, but seeing him like this, appearing defeated after everything we've all been through, makes me almost protective of him. If I could crawl into his lap right now just to wipe the sadness from his face, I would. But I can't and honestly, I'm not sure if I'm ready to do that. So instead, I give him what I can.

"I'm sorry," I say, and he glances back at me with fear still prominent in his eyes.

"I know you don't want this, me," he says gesturing to himself, and it takes me a second to realize why he said that. I

wasn't saying sorry because I didn't want them. I was saying sorry for scaring him, for refusing to let him touch me, and freaking the fuck out.

"Alexi, shut up for a second okay?" I start, letting go of Lev's hand and reaching out for his. He threads his fingers through mine as Damien chuckles. His brows pinch, but I don't give him the time to keep talking because I need him to understand.

"I'm sorry I freaked out, I'm sorry I scared you, and I'm sorry I pushed you away. I'm still trying to come to terms with reality right now and the withdrawal isn't helping, but I'm sorry I hurt you."

He lets out a breath as he leans his head into my lap and wraps his arms around my waist. I pull him to me, needing him to know that I want him to touch me. That, after everything, I trust him not to hurt me. We've been through too much.

"I never thought you would be the one saying sorry to me. If anything I should be here on my knees apologizing to you."

"I think after everything, maybe we should just start fresh. No baggage, no hurt. Let's just start here. With this," I offer as I tilt his head up to mine and brush my lips over his.

When I release him, he sighs back into me. "I don't want this moment to end," he says, his voice muffled by the way he's got his face firmly pressed to my chest, "but my father would like to talk to you. He just wants to explain." I stiffen, but Lev continues for him.

"Just hear him out. He might not be my favorite person, but I believe he wasn't trying to hurt you. And if he was, then I'll kill him. You have your blades, and if he makes a move to hurt you, use them. And if you can't, I will. Easy as that. But let's try to at least clear the air so we can come up with a plan."

I look at Lev in shock, not used to my gentle bad boy wanting to kill someone for me. And my traitorous pussy gets wet at the thought of him slitting Boris' throat while I sit back and watch.

Fuck, I need to get myself together. Looking out at the horizon, I try to recenter my thoughts because even I know I'm too injured still to crawl in his lap and ride that pierced dick like I want to.

The sun is starting to peek out over the water, and I don't want another day filled with grief and pain. I want to start moving forward. I want to find out who I am while I'm surrounded by people I love and trust. And if they trust Boris, then I'm going to have to try.

"I'll hear him out." As I relent, I swear every ounce of tension in Alexi's body deflates. He sits up and presses a kiss to my cheek, more gentle with me than he's ever been.

"Thank you, Princess." He takes my uninjured hand in his and gives it a soft squeeze as he gets to his feet. I squeeze back, letting him know I trust him. He leaves behind me, and I take a deep breath. I feel better today and after having the fresh air and a moment out of that stuffy room, my head feels like it's finally clearing up.

"The outdoors always helped me," Damien says quietly. "When it all felt like too much, there's just something about looking at the sky."

I nod in agreement loving how open and sweet he's being. I love seeing this gentle side of him, but I also love when he looks like he's about to murder someone. And here I go again, getting turned on. Thankfully a moment later, Boris steps out and it snaps me out of this apparent sex daze I'm unable to escape from. I make a mental note to ask Damien if withdrawal can make you horny as hell because if not, then something has to be wrong with me.

Boris walks around slowly and pulls up a chair, keeping a respectful distance. My eyes don't leave his and for a moment, it almost feels like he's challenging me. But then he drops them to sit and I let myself relax a little more.

Alexi stands behind my wheelchair and places a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Explain," is all he says.

“Right,” Boris says, sitting forward and adjusting his suit. I never wondered where Alexi got the suit thing from, but now it’s clear as day that his father cares about physical appearance more than rest based on the bags under his eyes. He clears his throat and begins. “When your parents were killed, I immediately went looking for you. One reason was out of selfishness, but the other was because I felt protective of you. I was there for each of your birthdays, including the very first moment you took a breath. I was the first person aside from your parents to hold you and even though we weren’t around much because of distance, you felt like a niece to me. I saw your father every other week and he would update me on everything you were doing and learning. I would compare where you and Alexi were in life, and I loved it. Honestly, I felt so much closer to Damir when we were talking about you.”

He leans forward with a heavy sigh. “But we also had a contract and if anything were to happen to them, then you were to be mine. Not just because I loved you like family and vowed to protect you with every resource I have, but because you were the original investment piece in their bargaining for the money for their casinos.”

I soak that in. I knew they had sold me before I was born as an investment, but Boris relieves the ache of that thought by diving deeper.

“They didn’t sell you to me as property,” he says carefully. “They promised you to me for Alexi, so you two would marry.”

Alexi’s hand tightens on my shoulder, and I wince in pain, causing him to release me instantly. I reach back and put his hand back to make sure he knows he didn’t hurt me, his father’s words did. It’s not fun to have other people plan out your life for you as if it were their own.

I lean forward in my chair, meeting his gaze. “My parents might have made a deal with you, but it’s up to me who I marry. What’s the other reason you wanted me back? The selfish reason?”

If he thinks I missed that part of his story, he's dead ass wrong. I'm basically keeping notes in my head to review later so I can decide if I trust him or not.

“The company is still in their name, your name. I wanted to help it grow and continue on as a legacy to Damir, but without you or your permission or me having guardianship over you, it's fallen to others' hands. That's a big reason I used so many resources to try to find you.”

“So you want me to come with you so I'll give you my parent's money?” I say with a laugh devoid of humor, as if that statement is going to get me to trust him. It does the exact opposite.

“No,” he says, startling me slightly with the harshness of his tone. I sit back and Lev sits forward, almost like he's preparing to put himself between us. “I want to help you. I want to teach you about it and the plans your father had for his empire. I'm not the gutless monster you have grown to think of me as so I would appreciate it if you stopped assuming and let me speak.”

His tone holds a note of hostility in it, and I'm not a fan. “You know, Boris, I don't really give a shit what you would ‘appreciate’,” I say putting finger quotes in the air. “I'm only hearing you out because these three men seem to trust you, but I don't. There isn't a fiber of my being that wants to be within a hundred miles of you, and your son wants me to come back to Russia so he can protect me.”

Boris' eyes snap to Alexi, apparently not knowing the depths of his plans or not aware that I know. “But I don't trust you, and your attitude has me not liking you on top of that. So if you want me to listen, then you better change your tone.”

I get the feeling not many people talk to him this way because the shock on his face is very apparent, and it has me feeling almost smug. I smile at him, flashing my teeth in a threat, and his face turns red.

“Father,” Alexi says in warning, but this is all good. I want to see how he reacts when he's mad. I want to see if he has control because that says a lot about a man.

“She just...” Boris waves his hand in the air like I’m the problem before he takes a breath and looks at the floor.

“The last time your father and I talked, we were planning to introduce the two of you again. You had met before at a gala but didn’t really know each other.” He keeps his eyes down, clearly trying to gain control of himself. “We decided together if marriage isn’t something the two of you wanted, then we would back off. Damir was going to give me my own share of the company instead, but I always had this feeling about the two of you.” He looks up and that’s when I finally see what I’ve been needing to so that we can move forward. Shame. Remorse. *Guilt*.

“That feeling wasn’t wrong, but I am sorry I tried to force it on you.” When he apologizes this time, I can see that he means it.

I don’t know how often the Pakhan of the Bratva apologizes, but I’m going to go ahead and assume this is a once-in-a-lifetime moment. I soak it in. The desperation on his face for me to believe him, the concern he has clearly seeing that I’m interested in more than just his son. And the regret.

“Okay,” I say, and they all turn to me.

“Little Shadow, care to explain what ‘okay’ means?” Damien asks.

“I’ll go home with you, but it’s not a permanent solution. We need a plan. A real plan.”

It’s Alexi who speaks up, walking around my chair so I don’t have to crane my neck to look at him. His body covers the sun, making him look like a silhouette as it rises behind him looking like a Roman soldier ready to wage war. “Then let’s gather the team, I’ve got a few ideas.”



Chapter 10

If there is anything I've learned about this group dynamic, it's that Laney is right up there at the helm guiding the boat with Evie. So when she comes to my suite looking worse for wear, I immediately put my guard up. I feel like I've proven myself to them, but there are still parts of my brain that remember being locked in that shed, and I would like to avoid going back there.

"Can we talk?" Laney asks, standing at my door. I usher her in and direct her to my room. I have two other suitemates, but we only have two rooms and Laney stops before she gets to my door.

"I thought you had two suitemates? Why just two rooms?" she asks.

“Lyra and Kia are together, and they asked to share a room,” I explain, gesturing for her to enter my space. I have two chairs with a coffee table between them in the corner since I love to cuddle up and read with Kia. I bring Laney over to them.

The girls might have helped with the ambush incident, but I haven’t had the time to gauge what they are comfortable with when it comes to this group, so I won’t have Laney in our common area until I can ask them about it.

“What do you want to talk about?” I ask hesitantly. I’m not offended by the fact that the girl doesn’t seem to trust me, in all reality none of us should trust each other.

“I…” she starts, looking around the room as if scanning to see if we are really alone. I let her look. I have nothing to hide. “I need your help.”

I try really hard not to let my jaw drop open in shock over those words but damn that feels good to hear. She notices my shock and laughs under her breath.

“I know it’s surprising I’m here, but I messed up and I’m doing what I can to fix it. Do you think you can help me?”

“That depends,” I answer cautiously. I feel like Laney wants to trust me and I want to earn her trust, but I feel like there’s going to be a long road ahead of us.

“We need a plan, and I want your help in coming up with one. I have some ideas, but Evie won’t talk to me. I have a feeling she will listen to you though.”

I soak this in for a moment. These two girls are together all the time and act like they are practically sisters. For Evie to be shutting her out, she had to have messed up big time. “What did you do?” I ask.

Tears stream down her cheeks as she explains her story and I sit there listening with a neutral expression on my face. I don’t want her to know how much the whole thing reminds me of my life and what I’ve had to do for my father. Laney is fiercely protective of Evie and a very strong woman, but when I look at her now, she looks like someone who needs a friend.

“What did you have in mind for the plan?” I ask, not needing to explain myself. If she wants my help, she will take what I can offer her. It’s not that I don’t want to share why I believe her or even tell her about my life too, it’s that I need her to change the subject now so that I can stop thinking about my damn past.

“You’ll help me?” she asks in surprise.

I clear my throat, careful not to show how many emotions are waging war inside my head. “As long as it’s a good plan. I’m not going in there with those people to give them shit ideas. If you’ve got something solid, I’ll bring it to them.”

She nods in approval and takes one of my hands in hers. She’s a very touchy person, and I’m trying not to squirm in my seat over how that makes me feel. Every once in a while, my mind gets stuck looking at her hair, noticing she hasn’t washed it in a few days. Or the way her eyelashes stick together after she rubs the tears from her eyes.

She talks for what feels like hours, and I have a whole new respect for Evie because if she’s friends with this girl, then she must have ear drums of steel. I’m about done with listening for the day when she finally wraps up.

“What do you think?” she asks. The main point is that we need Evie to go home with the guys. While she’s there, Laney can backtrack and find who was involved in the ambush by hacking the island servers. We would have time to clean house and secure the island so we could all finish out the year safely. It’s not a bad idea, but we would have to make sure very few people stay behind for the break to ensure no one is hiding out on the island. We would also have to have The Society do a full sweep of every inch of this place, and that will require a lot of convincing.

“It’s a good thing Evie got with those boys, or I would say there is no way in hell this shit would ever work.” Laney’s face falls at my response, “but,” I say, watching her perk back up, “those men will do anything for her. So.,I think we need to ask them.”

“You.”

“What?” I ask.

“You need to ask them. I don’t know if Evie has told them what I did but she won’t want me there. If they know what I did, then I’m a dead girl walking. So, it has to be you.”

I see her point, and she doesn’t seem to relax until I agree. I also need to come up with a way to get Evie to forgive this poor girl. I understand her hurt, but I also think she’s forgiven worse. She forgave me.

Besides, if anyone knows what it’s like to not be given a choice in this life, it’s Evie James.



A few hours later, I’m walking into the hospital heading to the room where we are all to meet. We now have a group chat thanks to Alexi. I stop at Evie’s room first though. Lev is lying in the bed with her, running his fingers through her hair as she looks at me. A soft smile graces her lips, and I will forever be thankful for the forgiveness this woman has offered me.

“Think we could chat for a minute before we all pile in next door?” I ask her.

She nods, but Lev makes no move to leave so I decide to just go for it. “Listen, I’m going to say this the only way I know how. It’s not meant to be rude or hurtful, but you need to hear it. Laney told me what she did.”

Evie’s jaw clenches and her nostrils flare, but she keeps the rest of her body relaxed and takes a deep breath. I take that as my cue to continue.

“And if anyone on this island can understand what she’s going through right now, it’s you. So, while you get to be hurt and you’re allowed to feel whatever the fuck you feel, you also need to get the fuck over it and forgive the poor girl.”

Lev looks between us like he might have to keep Evie from strangling me, and I honestly want to see her try. The past few days she has looked like she’s giving up, and I want to see that fight back in her spirit.

“What did she do?” Lev asks Evie, and I shake my head at them both.

“It’s not about what she did, it’s about who she is. I just sat in my room listening to the plan this girl came up with to keep your ass safe for four *hours*. Do you know how hard it is to pretend you’re listening for four fucking hours?”

A slight smile tugs at Evie’s lips before they cast down again.

“Look, Evie, I’m not saying she didn’t fuck up. I’m saying that she wasn’t given a choice. But the moment she could choose, she chose you, and you sent her away. I thought you were the kind of woman, the kind of leader, who put yourself in other people’s shoes and tried to understand. Fuck, what I wanted to do to you was so much worse, and you forgave me.”

Evie won’t look at me now, pointedly ignoring my presence. If she wants to act that way, then fine.

“I chose you too. Fuck my father and my family, fuck everyone who thinks less of us because we don’t have a big dick swinging between our legs. I thought you would choose us back. We fought for you, Evie. Are you going to fight for us?”

I don’t give her the chance to answer as I walk out, I just leave and go to sit patiently in the room next to hers until more people file in.



Chapter 11

“Care to tell me what happened?” Lev asks as soon as Nessa leaves the room.

I’m so angry I could hit something. I’m angry because she’s so fucking right. I curl into Lev and explain everything. In return, he just holds me tight as I cry. This damn crying is going to have to stop soon or I’m going to lose it. But the good thing is, I was finally able to pee by myself this morning without anyone helping me, so I feel like some things are getting better.

“Do you think you can trust her again?” Lev asks after I calm down. His fingers comb through my hair, and it’s everything I need so I don’t fall apart. This whole feeling weak all the time needs to stop. Doc thinks I can be detoxed enough by the time we leave in three days. I can switch to oral

medication for the rest of the process, but the guys don't all agree. If I could just stop crying and shaking, then maybe I'd feel like myself again and help convince them I'm ready.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "But I want to. She's my best friend. She told me the truth. I don't think she's hiding anything anymore. But the fact that she waited this long to say anything makes me want to break her nose."

Lev snorts at my dramatics and when I laugh back, I find that it actually doesn't hurt. I have to make sure not to lift anything for the next week, but hopefully after that I can ease back into my routine. All this lying around has me feeling antsy and out of control.

I want to forgive Laney. I want to be surrounded by this small group of people that I now want to keep. No matter how mad I might be at her, I still love her too. Nessa was right; they chose me. I need to make sure I choose them too.



I texted Laney, outside of the group chat, to come to the meeting. We are all set up in the conference room next to mine, and when she arrives, Arrow quietly waves her over to a seat by the door. I'm relieved she's taking this slow and staying back because I still need time, but this plan can't wait. We only have three days.

Angelo and Havoc sit towards the back with her. Nessa is near me while Lev, Damien, and Alexi stand at the front by the main board of information. It takes a long two hours of catching everyone in the room up to date on what we know. I've filled in the gaps for them with details I think are important. Havoc backs me up anytime I have to talk about how I betrayed the guys.

They all know about the tracker. Doc came in with some scans and told me he must have placed it just beneath the dense scarring under my rib cage. It was the only open wound I had when Adrik found me in Syria and he thinks that's when it was inserted.

Doc's been in and out of the room, attending to a few other students who are here because of the ambush and shootout. Six students were caught in the crossfire, those that didn't choose sides. One died and the other five are now out of the woods from critical condition, but still not in the clear. From the reports Alexi has given me, those who chose Bryce's side did not survive.

"Laney," Nessa says, getting everyone to quiet down while they discuss their ideas over one another, "I think you need to tell everyone your idea."

She stands up but looks at me first, almost like she's asking permission. The fact that Nessa knows she has a plan is already enough to tell me she's been trying—still working on my side even though I sent her away. Laney hasn't been a fan of Nessa's so if she went to her, then it's worth hearing her out.

I nod, and she walks toward the front of the room and clears her throat.

"The tracker is a problem. We need someone to take Evie's place while she's gone. Someone who can follow her routine and not deviate too much. This way, when they are in Russia, they can roam freely while finding a way for her to escape Adrik's control more permanently."

"I'll do it," Nessa offers without hesitation. I look at her in shock. She shrugs as she stands. "I told you I chose you, Evie. I plan to prove it."

Laney continues with her idea. She's really thought about everything. She lists details about the best ways for us to leave. She has ideas for how to keep me hidden while traveling. We even find out she's talked to Boris to get some specifics down as to the location, and see if he has any safe houses we can utilize while on the run.

This way we have a safe place to hide out while we plan our next steps. I'm relieved to know we will be somewhere that I don't have to worry about the guys being attacked. The island should be that place for us, but we never know what to expect now that so many people have gotten through the barriers.

Alexi had The Society set up a patrol out on the water. We now have sensors surrounding the island to make everyone aware if any unwanted guests attempt to dock here.

“Adrik didn’t send all of those men,” Havoc says, causing us to all look at him. “You told me what happened during the ambush, every detail. Think about it, E. You know these men; you know their training and their skills. That whole job was a sloppy mess from start to finish. There’s another player here. I’m not sure it’s safe for you to leave until we know who that is.”

There’s a voice telling me in my mind that he’s right. The way I was carried and set down, not tied up even though I was unconscious. The fact that I was able to get the jump on them as they tried to flee and had no one running the perimeter around the gym for cover.

These weren’t the Shades. But that just means someone else is out there, and I don’t have the mental capacity to think about that now.

“Did he send Bryce after me?” I question.

Bryce seemed to be the leader of a lot of the chaos, but he was also clearly answering to someone.

“He initially had him under his thumb, but about a month back, the kid went radio silent. I dug through all of that information specifically because I needed to know where you were and how far he had gone. When Bryce cut contact, that seemed to be when his plans escalated, and he began drafting ideas to take you out or hurt you bad enough that you were on the edge and willing to give it all up.”

“But they wore the same masks,” I say, knowing that is a normal tactic, but also confused as to how they are so similar. “And the guys that came after me all disappeared as well. Who else could this be?”

We all take time to think, Alexi staring at the board so hard I swear he believes it will submit to him if he only looks hard enough. I move to him and take his hand in mine, whispering

just for him to hear while everyone around us talks about their theories.

“We will figure it out,” I say as I squeeze his hand.

He squeezes mine back, and I can't help the small smile that comes to my face. The man I never wanted to touch me now has a special language with me simply by squeezing my hand.

“What if I can't keep you safe? What if I lose you too?” he whispers back.

I squeeze his hand again because I honestly don't know what to tell him, but I offer him the only thing I can think of, “My mother once told me that darkness can be a friend to those who learn to harness its power. We've harnessed it. We've come out on the other side of the dark together. Let's put it to the test. The Shades hide in the dark, so let's use that against them.”

He looks at the board again, cocking his head ever so slightly, like he understands exactly what I'm saying. I don't have to spell out war strategy to this man, he already gets it. So when he turns around, switching our hands and pulling me closer, I feel more relieved than I have in days. Because my dark knight has come to play, and there's nothing I trust more than the fact that he will keep me safe.



“Are you ready?” Doc asks me, holding out my phone. We have to make sure my uncle believes I still have no idea what's going on. Our plan to get out is solid, but to actually get away has proven to be trickier. We are all going home and Laney is coming with us. Lev is sitting in front of me looking like he could throw the phone across the room, but I take a deep breath and hit call.

Lev is staying out of sight but wanted to be here to hold my hand if needed. Doc is going to go over what happened and inform him of my medical status. Then, I'm going to lie.

I feel more in control tonight. I haven't been shaking most of the day, and I was able to stand during most of the meeting

earlier. They removed all the lines and larger bandages and replaced them with smaller ones, but Doc wrapped a large bandage around my head. We are going to try and make him think it's not safe for me to travel so he understands why I won't be coming home for this break.

I hit the call button and slip on my mask. One of pain and anger. I let my mind fall into the idea that I was just attacked by Boris' men, that I'm afraid they will get to me again. I force my mind to clear and to be convinced that my uncle is my family who will protect me. Then, I add on the determination.

Doc is standing by me, the screen pointing at us both when he answers. The fake shock on his face is almost enough to make me laugh, but Doc helps me stay in character with a squeeze of his hand on my shoulder. It looks like he's taking pity on me to my uncle, but that really he's lending me his strength to get through this.

“Good evening, Mr. Petrov. We are calling to inform you of an incident...”

Doc talks for a while and explains that I won't be able to move much for the next few days and that he is having a team move me to the suite once I can get around better. He wants to keep an eye on me for the next three weeks before I resume normal activity, and I watch my uncle absorb it all.

This isn't going to his plan. I was supposed to go home with the Kings and kill Boris over break, which means he's pissed. Maybe he shouldn't have sent his men after me. *Asshole*. He schools his rage and puts on the act of a concerned uncle like a champ. When Doc is finished, he leaves and it's just me and my uncle, as far as he knows at least.

Carefully, I take Lev's hand in mine, centering myself in the moment.

“Little Warrior, what the hell happened?”

I let the fake tears fall and I see him attempt to soften for me. It's amazing how much I can see he fakes with me now that I know who he really is. The tick in his jaw when I get

upset isn't him wanting to defend me, it's him being angry he has to restructure the plan. The way he closes his eyes in frustration as if he's appalled any of this could happen to me here is grade-A acting, but it's all an act.

"I swear I'm going to get him. If it's the last thing I do. I swear it."

The smile that stretches across his face as I say the words I know he's been wanting to hear is vile. It's full of the most arrogant evil I've ever witnessed, and it makes me hate him even more. Lev begins to rub circles on my leg with his free hand and I take a breath, not wanting to come across as furious as I really am.

"That's my Warrior. You get some rest. Heal. I'll call you before people return so we can strategize a new plan to take them down. We need them at their weakest so you can strike. Don't forget to keep taking your medications so you can recover quickly. They won't get away with doing this to you. You may not be my daughter, but I sure as hell will defend you like you are."

I nod at him because if I were to speak, I would yell. I would tear into him for not knowing what family really is. I would tell him of all the ways I want to destroy him. But instead, I take a breath, a long one that I pretend is me being in pain so he stays none the wiser.

"Thank you," I say through gritted teeth. Then, I end the call with words that I strongly believe. "No one attacks my family and gets away with it. Their murders will be avenged if it's the last thing I do."

It's the only honest thing I've said during this call, and I feel relieved that I mean it. He will pay for what he did. I don't know how just yet, but I'll give my life for it if I have to. He will not win.

When the call goes dark, Lev takes the phone from my hand and pulls me into his chest. I've learned not to fight them when they want me close, so I move with him so that my stitches don't pull.

We lay there together while I doze in and out. It's amazing how peaceful I'm starting to feel, sleeping without the constant nightmares. The anxiety about sleep is still there, but Damien taught me a few things to help my mind relax. I take a deep breath for four seconds, hold for four seconds, and release for four.

"You okay with this? Talk to me, Lucky Charm."

I turn in his hold as he props himself up on his side so we are facing each other.

"It's all a lot, but if you haven't noticed, I tend to figure it out. It is nice not having to figure it out on my own though."

Having his support over the past few days has changed something in me. I don't plan on relying on them for everything, but knowing I have someone who will back me up has boosted my confidence when I've been down.

"You're never going to have to again if you stick with us," he says, rubbing his nose against mine. I smile at how cute he is. This big, tatted, pierced man is giving me nose kisses in my hospital bed as he cuddles with me. *Gods I love this man.*

I nuzzle into his chest with a huge ass smile on my face. Things are going to get better. They have to.



Chapter 12

This is a mess. Everything I've done up to this point has been carefully constructed. Make her depend on me. Create trauma so she can't see through the pain. Have her therapists push her to seek revenge.

It's not because she's the only one who can do this job, it's because of what he did to me. My brother's best friend. They left me when I started working with the Shades, saying they would rather align themselves with the Russian mafia than with a ruthless assassin organization that holds more power than they ever could. Damir claimed we had no morals, but he was the one who sold his kid before he even knew her.

Too bad that backfired on him. I knew Boris would never take Eydis away from him. The man loved my brother more than our own mother did. He just wanted to show him the

power he held, wanted to own a piece of him so he could claim they were closer than brothers, as if to spit in my face. Boris and I never got along. But my brother and I had been thick as thieves, literally, until he came along promising my brother the world.

So pathetic—holding something over someone's head so that they stay close to you. He's weaker than my own brother. When he turned his back on me, my fiancé left with them, claiming she didn't know me anymore, didn't feel safe with me. She ran into Boris' arms, and his bed, falling in love with him before she even sent back the ring I gave her. Now the bitch got exactly what she deserved.

I swore I would get revenge on both of them for turning their backs on me, my own blood. I found the perfect person to team up with to make it all happen. He thought the Russian mafia was so great, so I'm going to take that too. I had my brother killed along with his precious wife all at the hands of someone who truly believed in me and the power I would hold one day. Then, I took his kid and made her trust me. Had her looking only to me for a purpose. I taught her to only want revenge and never allowed her to see another purpose in the world.

You see, the problem with turning your back on someone who joins an organization without morals is that it makes you a target.

I created trauma at every turn for his little girl so that she never had time to think about anything other than pain. I crafted friendships so that they could be broken and made sure my men showed her where she belonged. Yet, she surprised me and rose above it all.

I truly thought she might be unbreakable until I sent her to that prison camp. It took over thirty days before I saw her giving up. Longer than any other man I've sent there. I think that's the only reason I was ever able to pretend to love her. It was never her I adored, it was what she could do for me.

And now that's all gone to shit.

Bryce went and got himself killed after going above my head on the matter. The girl I set up to feed me intel went dark after I had her plant a video that would prevent Evie from trusting those damn kings ever again. The men I sent to torture Eydis so that she thought the kings were after her all ended up dead, not to mention the fact that the torture was taken way too far. The only survivors were the clean-up crew I flew in so none of them could be traced back to me.

Fucking useless pieces of shit ruined the whole damned plan. Good riddance.

I needed to get her home. I need her to come back so I can rewrite the story for her in a way that keeps her at my mercy. But my guys got a little too stabby in their pursuit and apparently injured her too badly for her to be able to travel at the moment. She's falling for those men, making friends I never intended her to make, and now she's starting to see that taking down the Russian mafia might not be her only path in life.

I need to burn that bridge. I need it to crumble beneath her so that she never forgets her place.

I need Havoc back so that I can come up with a plan, maybe frame it as another rescue mission. He's another thing I didn't see coming. He cares for my niece, and I've been having to hide the majority of what's been going on so that he doesn't know what I'm putting her through. If he knew I was setting her up to take the fall for everything, he would warn her. And I really don't want to have to kill one of my closest friends.

I'm aware he found out about her mission on the island and hadn't been too happy about it. But him disappearing on mission and not checking in this past week has put me on edge. Mac disappearing along with Havoc has me raising even more questions, but this isn't the first time this has happened when he needed to go dark, so I'm giving him a few more days before I assume he figured shit out and turned his back on me. It's just a giant inconvenience he took my only hacker that could crack the hard-drive stolen from Lev.

I put my anxiety to ease by clicking on a video on my computer. Setting her up to fail her challenge was truly all too easy, but watching her car drive off the cliff is an adrenaline high I never expected to see. I watch the video until I'm reminded that I'm fully in control, and then I call my contact to move to plan B. Boris is going down, even if Eydis has to kill herself in the process.



Chapter 13

I've been hesitant to go near Evie since everything that happened. She might have let me close to her when we were out on the balcony, but when it's just us in this room, I can't shake the way she looked at me. She wasn't just hurt, terror crossed her features and the way my heart broke at the sight is a pain I never want to feel again.

Except, when she wakes up from a small surgery she had because Doc found a small scrap of metal under her skin left from the attack, she pats the bed beside her like it's missing someone. Her eyes are still closed and I can't not crawl in beside her. She carefully turns on her side and throws an arm over my chest, pinning me to the bed.

My muscles are tense at first but as the minutes pass, and she does nothing but relax into me, I finally let myself breathe.

Her scent overwhelms me, and I find myself taking deep breaths of her in. Lev washed her hair last night after they took the fake bandage off of her head and just the scent of her smelling like her usual self settles something deep in my chest.

“Why do I feel like you don’t want to be here?” she asks me, not opening her eyes. The way this girl can go from being dead to the world to awake in a split second based on my thoughts alone speaks volumes about how perfect we are for each other.

I can’t tell her that I’m afraid for her, or that I’m afraid for myself. The words get caught in my throat, making my head spin with all the answers I want to give but can’t.

She opens her eyes after a minute of me fighting the voices in my head and carefully sits up. She woke up for a moment for Doc to tell her everything went great, but the meds knocked her out again right after. She studies my face and seems to understand that it’s not that I don’t want to speak to her, it’s that I physically can’t.

“I understand if you don’t want to be part of this. Just because I love them doesn’t mean I won’t share them with you. You’re not stuck with me just because of them.”

That’s what she’s thinking right now?

My face scrunches up in confusion, but she only seems to take that as confirmation by the way her lips seem to fall. I may not be able to give her words, so I give her the only thing I *can* offer her.

My hand shoots out and for a second, I think she’s going to flinch away. I expect the same terrified expression she wore just a few hours ago on the floor is going to cross her features. But instead, she turns into me. I’m not gentle when I pinch her chin and force her mouth to mine. I don’t care when I force her mouth open that I’m probably pushing into very tender bruises, or that her nearly healed lip splits open all over again.

Blood coats my tongue as I sweep it into her mouth, and she surprises me by suctioning her lips around me and sucking. I groan in response as I move her to straddle me. She’s still weak and sore so I don’t want to roll on top of her, and I think

somewhere deep in my mind, it knows that this is where she belongs. *On top.*

Her hands cup my face as she pulls me closer and I rock up into her. I've been hard since she kneeled for me on the first day I met her, and I'm never going to let her forget who she is to me now.

She is fire and fight. War and retribution. A weapon and a gift. She. Is. *Everything.*

I know she's still too weak for me to fuck her because when I take her for the first time, it's not going to be light. She needs to know who I am and what I need in that scene. But here and now, I can still give her what *she* needs.

I slide my hand between our bodies, keeping the other firmly on her hips so she knows exactly what I want her to do. She's wearing a large black shirt that comes to her knees and says 'fuck around and find out'.

And I desperately want to find out.

When my hand slips to her center I find there's nothing to stop my fingers from sliding between her dripping pussy. My whole body groans in response. She has no idea what being bare like this does to me.

I can feel her lips lift up in a smile and I smile back as I deepen the kiss. Her hips rock over my fingers, and I gently add pressure to her clit with my thumb, wanting to see and feel how she responds to everything. Once she seems to relax into the pressure, I start rubbing tight circles, teasing her entrance with my other fingers as I pick up the pace.

Her body tilts back like she's trying to get more. She's so wet that when I finally push two fingers inside, they meet no resistance. My mouth waters, wanting to replace my fingers with my tongue and taste the pussy Damien can't stop talking about.

Spit fills my mouth and when she pushes her tongue in, I take my hand from her hip and pull her head down, gathering the saliva and tonguing it into her mouth. She whimpers as I curl my fingers inside her, then flicks her tongue out to lick

mine dry. I'm shocked by how in sync we move together. I gently thrust my hips up into her, adding pressure to my hand so she can feel me even deeper. Her head falls to the side, nuzzling in my neck as her body seems to give itself over to me.

Evie's panting speeds up, her breath fanning over my neck. I'm so turned on that I might actually come in my pants right now. She latches her mouth onto my neck, sucking and branding me as hers.

With my free hand, I push our shirts up and free my length as quickly as I can because I'm not about to come without feeling her juices drip down my cock. I fist myself between us while keeping pace with my fingers. When I pull them free, she sucks in a breath but I push her down to glide her clit along my cock. She lets out a deep groan that has me coming undone instantly.

She cries out softly as her orgasm washes over her. Her hips still jerk back and forth slightly to prolong the pleasure. I can feel her pussy pulsing along my shaft as I make a mess between us, coating myself in more cum than I've ever released in my life.

When she falls to my side, she keeps her face firmly planted into my neck. I don't want to move, even as my release starts to dry on my stomach. I remove my shirt carefully and wipe us both clean with it. There's a bathroom across from us, but I don't want to leave her side.

I toss it on the floor beside us, not giving a shit if I make a mess for the first time in my fucking life, and turn to face my girl. Her face is flushed, and the smile she gives me is one I finally feel like I've earned. I pull her into my bare chest and cover us with the blanket. Her arms wrap around me and within seconds, we are fused together as if we were one being.

I kiss her on her forehead as her breathing slows and whisper more to myself than her, "I'm never letting you go."



When I wake up, Evie is still pressed firmly to me but she's dripping in sweat. I don't want to wake her in case it's a night terror of some kind, but I also need to know she's okay.

I glance up at the monitors and see her heart rate is a little high but nothing crazy. I slowly remove the covers from us, not wanting to shock her body by going too fast. I carefully roll her on her side, and her eyes don't flutter. I grab a damp cloth from the bedside table that was left after her surgery and gently pat her face.

She still doesn't move. I keep looking at the monitors and her body, checking her over for signs of a new injury. Maybe what we did was too much. Maybe she wasn't ready, and I was just being a selfish and controlling dick.

Fuck.

The door opens and Lev walks in to find me in a panic. He rarely ever sees this side of me so when his brain seems to catch up with the sight, he rushes over to us.

"She's dripping in sweat and not moving," I say in a low voice.

Lev looks at the monitors, and then gently checks her over like I just did. When he sighs in relief, I feel like every nerve in my body is going to explode if he doesn't explain to me what's happening right now.

"It's just the withdrawal mixed with the meds from surgery. This is normal." Lev reaches over and takes my hand in his before placing it gently on Evie's chest. "Her heart is still beating, see?"

I feel the steady thump under my hand and finally let myself breathe. Lev sits on the end of the bed and looks at me. He seems better, but there's still pain in his eyes.

"She told me what Laney did. Did she tell you?" he asks me.

I shake my head. "No."

He nods, seeming to understand why and I try to keep myself from being frustrated by that. "I'm going to tell you,

but you need to promise me you won't kill her. Evie has started to forgive her, and Nessa seems to know the whole story. But you need to know Laney was working for Adrik for a short period of time."

When my fists clench, Lev notices, and rushes out the rest of this story in a way he thinks will prevent me from attacking the girl the next time I see her. "Her whole family was being threatened and she had no choice. The last contact they had was when she hacked into the email system and changed the video you sent."

I start furiously pacing the damned hospital room. I swear nothing good can happen in this damn room without a fallout afterward.

"Alexi," Lev says cautiously, like he's talking to a bear that's about to tear into flesh.

"What?" I snap back, barely able to contain my rage as I watch him climb into the bed beside her and continue to dab the cloth on her head.

"She needs her. She fessed up to it and told the truth. Evie needs her. Don't fuck this up, please? This is finally all coming together. Don't fuck it up."

I look at the girl laying in the bed next to him. The color is finally starting to return to her face and the bruising is nearly gone. There's a hard line pressed into her brow, and I can feel her strength even in her sleep. If she needs this Laney girl, I'm not going to take her away, but I'm sure as fuck going to talk to her.

That video is what ruined everything, but also started everything too. I hate what it caused Evie to do and how she felt, but I can't bring myself to hate that it eventually brought her to me.

"I won't kill her," I grit out, "but I am going to talk to her."

Lev nods as he takes Evie's hand in his. We haven't had to make a schedule or guess who needs to be where. Like Lev said before, things just fell into place with us. The guys and I have always worked as a well-oiled machine, and Evie fits into

that perfectly. As much as we all want to take care of her, we also know she can take care of herself.

That thought is both reassuring and terrifying because I know she will never need us, but I'll settle for her wanting us. Even now, she doesn't need us. No matter how much I want to convince myself otherwise. She would recover and come out strong on the other side without one of us being here for her to cuddle next to at all times. She would still heal and pull herself together to fight the next fight because that's just who she is.

And that's the only reason I'm not going to kill Laney. If Evie needs her in her life, I'm not taking anyone else away from her. She's suffered too much. I plan to do everything I can to keep the people she cares about safe and hidden. I don't care if we have to live out of a hut in the North fucking Pole. I will lock it down and keep them all safe.

My pace is practically a run as I shoot over to the building with Laney's room. I might not be planning to kill her, but the knock I pound on the door might say otherwise. I swear I hear wood split at one point.

The sound of footsteps gives way to that of a gun cocking as the door opens slowly. My gun is loaded, cocked, and ready in my hand as I come face to face with a shirtless Havoc. His gun is raised as well and the sure smile he plants on his face has me wholly confused. The situation only gets worse when I see Arrow walk out of Laney's room and a fuming red-faced girl behind him.

Havoc drops his gun, but they both seem to think I'm about to kill the girl. *Rightfully so*. They plant themselves in front of her like they think they could keep me away, and she is pissed.

"Get the FUCK out!" Laney yells, shoving Arrow and pointing a savage finger at Havoc. "Evie might have said you could sleep in her room, but you don't answer my door!"

Well, that at least explains a little bit of what's happening.

"I don't need two Dobermans hovering. It's Alexi. Evie would literally blow his brains out if he did anything to me. So you both need to leave because this is obviously important."

It seems like Laney knows exactly why I'm here, but these guys seem to know that too.

"I'm not leaving," Arrow says swiftly. "I'll be in here." He points to her room. "You can let me know when you're done." He shuts the door behind him before she can retaliate. Laney stares at the door in disbelief, muttering something under her breath about guard dogs and noble men being such assholes.

"You," she points at Havoc again, "go."

He looks me up and down. I lower my gun and uncock it as I raise a brow. He shrugs and goes back to Evie's room, shutting the door behind him.

I'm still beyond confused as to what the fuck is happening in here, but I also don't care.

"Why aren't you wearing a shirt, Alexi?" she asks as she takes in my appearance.

"We need to talk," I tell her, ignoring the question, and she rolls her eyes at me. *Fucking rolls her eyes at me.* I begin to wonder if Evie gave her a run down of how to piss me the fuck off really quick because I'm already finding it hard not to lay a hand on her.

I clench my fists to refrain from knocking her ass out as she turns on her heel and moves to sit on the couch.

I sit in the chair across from her as I contemplate my words.

"Look, I know what you're going to say," Laney starts for me. "I fucked up, I'm aware. I know better at this point. If you're going to kill me, then just let me know now so we can get this over with. I haven't slept in two days, and I have more ideas for how to protect her, so if I could give you those thoughts before you shoot me that'd be awesome."

I take in her appearance. The bright girl who always seems to be Evie's polar opposite is melting away. Her eyes are sunken in and the way she's hugging her coffee mug seems to be like her only lifeline at the moment. I am pissed and I don't know if I trust her after what she pinned on me, but she might also be my greatest ally in keeping Evie safe.

She may dress up in pink and always look like she's ready to walk down a runway, but she also has fire in her that reminds me of my princess, and I want to see what she's made of.

"When we are in Russia, you don't leave her side. If one of us isn't with her at any point, you are. You'll allow me to track your phone at all times so I know where she is because I refuse to track hers, and we both know she's too smart for that anyway. You keep her inside, and you keep her safe if I'm not there. Can you do that?"

She's utterly confused with my response by the way her mouth opens and shuts like a fish out of water.

"I know what you did," I continue, "but I also believe you'll protect her just like we would. So if you can help me keep her safe, I won't kill you."

She sighs and rubs a hand down her face. "Alexi, you can't trap her in a cage. She's going to freak the fuck out when she realizes what you're doing."

I shrug. "I don't really give a shit. She will be safe. That is all that matters."

Laney looks like she wants to talk some sense into me, but she must sense I'm not going to budge on this. Everything we've found out the past few days has had my head spinning with a way to protect what's mine. At least this gives me some hope that maybe I won't lose someone else too.

"Fine, but if she freaks out on me, I'm telling her this was your idea."

I get up to leave, "I don't care if she finds out what I'm doing to protect her. She will have to learn to understand." I told her she could roam freely on the property and I meant it. She can hold onto the illusion that she is free, while I keep a careful eye on her the whole time.

"Hey, Alexi?" I turn back to her with my hand on the door. "You know you have a giant ass hickey on your neck, right?"

I do know, and I'll wear my girl's marks proudly, but I don't like the smug smile on her face. "You know both of the men in

here are in love with you, right?” Her only response is her jaw dropping, and I take that as my cue to excuse myself.

When I walk out of the building, I’m grateful for my lack of a shirt because the cool air slaps me in the chest. It’s a welcome feeling, the jolt of awareness it brings is what I need to get our plans moving forward. We leave in two days, and the house needs to be secured. When I get back to the suite, I move to the next phase of my plan, ensuring everyone on the property is one-hundred percent vetted. I will not take any chances this time.

If she wants to run, I need to make sure we can run with her.



Chapter 14

It's been twenty-four hours since my last surgery. When I wake up to pee I find I don't need any assistance walking. In fact, it seems I'm almost back to normal. Better than normal actually with how clear my head is.

I take my time in the bathroom to wash my face and brush out my tangled hair. Lev's been brushing it a lot, something that seems to soothe him just as much as it calms my soul. I smile thinking about waking up in his arms and how happy he looked that I didn't need his help.

I'm ready to go back to the suite. They removed my IV's yesterday so all I have on me now are these pesky wires that monitor my heart. I haven't had any issues with it since I've come off my medications, or drugs rather. I don't let that

thought spoil this moment though. The moment I can finally get out of this damn room.

Lev passes me a bag containing some clothes and face moisturizer. I make myself look alive and well so that Alexi doesn't fight the doctors on me staying here until it's time for us to head to Russia. Chills erupt down my body at the thought. I've stayed out of that country for so long, making sure I never got too close to Boris' radar. Now, I'm just about to walk right into the home of the man I've been running from since I can remember.

I brace myself against the sink and take a few deep breaths. My emotions will not get the best of me. I am strong. I've been through hell, and told the devil to fuck off for refusing to help me. A few Russians shouldn't bother me.

I take a long look in the mirror, and I swear a fog lifts from my head. I can see clearly, think clearly, and I've been sleeping better than I ever have. I'll never admit it to the guys, but the warmth of them next to me makes me feel as protected as I once did when I was snuggled in my cocoon in my father's safe room.

When I walk out, wearing shorts for the first time in days and a shirt that says 'Kinda sweet, Kinda savage', all three of the guys look at me like I'm still a damsel in distress. I toss my duffle at Damien a little too forcefully just to prove that I'm back to myself. He grunts as he grabs it and I gather the last few things so we can leave.

When the nurse comes in to remove the portable monitor, Alexi eyes both of us warily. Before she can remove the first sticker, he's speaking, "Are you sure you're ready? You can stay one more day. Doc said the extra monitoring can't hurt." The nurse freezes and I try to not get annoyed with him.

I give him a look because I'm genuinely worried that he might hurt this poor woman for removing the monitor his eyes have been glued to for five days now. Instead of answering, I forcefully rip the stickers from my chest, refusing to even wince as the burn from the tape radiates across my skin. I hold his eye the entire time and when I'm finished, I drop it in the

nurse's hand and she scurries away before Alexi can flip out on her.

“Try to stop me from leaving here, Batman, and I might choke you out again.” His jaw locks. I know he wants to retaliate for my attitude, but he takes a deep breath instead and puts his hand on the small of my back to walk me out.

He's not forceful, just careful as he guides me. Lev and Damien follow in step behind him, flanking my sides and we leave as a unit. My boys naturally surrounding me as if we've been doing it our whole lives. When we get outside, I could actually squeal. The sun is out and even though the air is cool, it's a beautiful day. I take a minute to soak it in, stopping just a few feet from the hospital and smiling like a captive animal that just got released into the wild. I feel free for all of twenty seconds, then Alexi speaks.

“The island is still on lockdown until everyone leaves, but you shouldn't be out in the open like this, come on.”

Damn him for ruining this for me. I look at Damien with a smirk, and he seems to know exactly what I'm about to do before I do it. His feet move more quickly than I thought possible, or maybe I'm just slow, but when I turn to take off in a jog back to the suite, he scoops me up in his arms before I make it ten feet.

“Don't test us, Little Shadow,” he growls in my ear playfully, nipping at it and making me laugh. I knew I couldn't run the whole way back, but I wanted to re-establish the group dynamic and make it clear that I don't bow to anyone.

“Fine,” I sigh and relent, playfully pushing at his chest. Alexi looks furious, but I'm enjoying every second of this game. The quicker he realizes I'm not his to own and boss around, but his to stand side by side and fight, the better.

Damien walks me to his car and carefully puts me into the seat. Lev throws my bag in the back and shuts the door after giving me a kiss on the forehead. I adore his affection, but they all act like every move we make might be our last and it's making me anxious.

Damien slides into the driver's seat while Alexi and Lev hop on their bikes. A firm hand rests on my thigh and his thumb rubs circles. The comfort of this man and his simple consistent gestures puts my heart at ease.

Lev and Alexi flank us on the way back, never more than ten feet from the car. I haven't seen them ride like this before, and I catch myself staring more than once. They are hot as fuck. Alexi is the epitome of a dark knight in his black tank with black pants and helmet. His matte black bike only adds to the sexiness, and the guns strapped to his chest have me almost whimpering with the need to jump him. The small moment we had yesterday was hardly enough to settle the ache in my core.

Then I look over at Lev in his white t-shirt and jeans. His electric green bike makes him almost blend into the grass and trees around us, just like the ghost he is.

"You're drooling," Damien says with a grin as he squeezes my thigh. I clamp my legs together because there is no way in hell that smile of his didn't turn me on even more. He knows it too.

"Think I can get you off before we get back?" he questions with an air of arrogance I don't want to acknowledge because his fingers even brushing my clit at the moment might just be enough to make me come, and I don't want to give him the satisfaction.

He doesn't wait for me to answer though, just slowly slides his hand up my thigh, giving me time to say no if I wanted to. I don't think I'll ever want to though. When his hand slips into my shorts, my thighs spread for him and I see him go from half-hard to fully erect and ready to fuck in under ten seconds.

"Always so ready for us," he says, cupping my bare pussy. When his fingers slide between my lips, moving up to brush my clit, I nearly come undone. He sucks in a sharp breath as my arousal coats his fingers in an instant.

"Fuck, baby girl, is this what you need?" He rubs light circles around my opening, moving up to the sensitive nub before dipping back down again. He's teasing, trying to edge

me. But two can play that game. I reach over and in one swift move, I wrap my hand around his monster cock and give it a squeeze.

His hips buck up into my hand almost involuntarily and he revs the engine by accident. I let out a chuckle, but the face he gives me when he turns has me worried I've done something wrong. I hesitate for a moment, wondering if I should ask or just let him tell me after, but he decides for me.

"You don't have to, Little Shadow," he says, and I finally see what he's worried about. The last time we did anything, he was forcing me to my knees. He doesn't think he deserves this. He doesn't think he deserves me.

Damien's eyes bounce back to the road and then to me. It's a short drive, and we are nearing the suite already. But I need him to know I don't hold anything against him. He apologized and so did I. We have to forgive and move on, just like he's been teaching me to do.

"Is this mine?" I ask as I dip my hands below his waistband and stroke him up and down unhurriedly. He nods immediately, so I continue to play with him. "Use your words, Sunshine."

"Yes," he says, bucking up into my hand again, careful not to hit the gas this time. I swipe my thumb over the top, rolling the bead of precum in and teasing his slit. I felt the way his thighs clenched when I played with this sensitive area with my tongue, and I revel in the way he tilts his head back in ecstasy.

His fingers start up again as our moans fill the small space. Damien's panting only turns me on more, and I start pumping harder and faster, twisting my hand around as I get to the tip. His fingers add delicious pressure to my clit just before pushing inside me, and I clamp down around him instantaneously, coming with a scream as my legs shake.

The second his fingers feel my pussy pulse for him, jets of cum shoot out all over his shirt, making a mess of him as he comes to a stop in front of the suite. We both take a minute to catch our breath but when Lev opens my door with a smirk,

catching Damien's hand still in my pants and mine coated in his cum, he almost laughs.

I look at Lev with glassy eyes, feeling sated and so fucking happy I could cry. *These men are mine.*

I hesitate before getting out, and Lev backs up to give me space. I turn to Damien to clear the air though. We are moving forward.

“Do you remember the day I took Alexi down on the mats?” I ask, and he nods back at me as confusion coats his features. “Do you remember when I sliced Bryce's arm for touching me?” He must see where this is going because when he nods, this time his eyes seem less distant. “And do you remember when I grabbed you by the balls and put you in your place?”

Another nod and even though I know he gets my point, I say it anyway. “No one here has found a way to force me to do anything I didn't want to do and walk away unscathed. You're mine and I'm yours, so don't question me when I play with *my* toys. Got it?”

That wicked grin finally comes out and I lean in to kiss him, uncaring that Lev and Alexi are outside the car waiting for us. I don't give a shit that he's covered in his own cum or that his hand is still in my pants. All I care about is making sure he knows he's mine just as much as I am his.

When we separate, I crawl out of the car because the damn thing practically lays on the ground. When I stand at full height, I see a snarling Alexi. Fuck, if he's going to be this possessive all the time, I might have to take him down again just to show him how capable I am of handling myself. But we've been through a lot and he's stayed by me. So instead of making a snarky comment or egging him on, I lean into him and stretch up to kiss his cheek. He's not expecting it, and I've come to crave that shocked face he makes when I do something he can't plan fifteen steps ahead for.

I give him a gentle smile and proceed to walk up to the suite. I'm embarrassed and panting by the time we make it to the door, two flights of stairs having apparently done me in after laying around for five days.

“And you wanted to run,” Lev says with a laugh as he opens the door.

I blame it on the orgasm.

I give him a fake huff of annoyance while he holds the door open for me, and I walk in to see our living space transformed into a mock-up of the fucking CIA. My jaw nearly hits the floor before a shirtless Damien scoops me up in his arms and brings me to the couch. The room we were using to plan in the hospital has clearly been stripped and everything was brought here. It's a lot to process but when it feels like my head is going to spin, I look back to see all three of my guys standing there, ready to shield me from the world. It makes me relax instantly. I may be fully capable of fighting my own battles, but the relief of not having to do it alone right now is insurmountable.

“Let's get packed,” Alexi says, getting straight to business. “We leave in the morning and need to make sure not to leave anything behind in case anyone is still here that we haven't found and vetted. Nessa and Laney will work together in making sure the island stays clear. Nessa will be taken from the hospital to your room in the morning. Make sure she has a very detailed outline of how you would move. We don't need your uncle getting any hints about what we're up to.”

I nod and get moving. I'm already packed so I don't have much I need to do other than leave Nessa notes, but I know it's best not to piss him off when he's in mission mode. Lev looks at me with a hunger in his eyes as he follows me closely to my room with Damien trailing right behind him.

Heading straight to my closet, I grab an already-packed duffle while Damien brings me the other one from the hospital. I throw dirty stuff in that one and keep my clean clothes in the other. Within five minutes I'm done. When I walk out I find Lev sitting on my bed, Damien's fingers sliding in and out of his mouth. The same fingers he just fucked me with in the car.

My thighs clench. I'm more turned on by that than anything I've ever seen in my life. When Lev makes eye contact with

me and flicks out that sinful tongue of his to push between Damien's fingers, I almost lose my mind, wanting to jump him on my bed right now.

Damien looks back at me with a grin. "Do you like watching him taste you on me, Little Shadow?"

I beam back at him, completely unashamed of the way I'm feeling. "Yes," I admit as I walk over to the bed and lean down to kiss Lev, sliding my tongue into his mouth to taste myself. I just came less than ten minutes ago and I swear I could go for another round already.

I wouldn't say I'm addicted to sex, but I'm slowly becoming addicted to these men.

"Fuck, Little Shadow, I'm going to come again just at the sight of the two of you."

I move to stand and try with everything in me to hold back the wince of my stitches stretching painfully after bending over like that to kiss Lev. But Damien sees it and instantly picks me up and lays me out on the bed.

"We can't have you hurting yourself again, we need you to heal so we can fuck you properly, baby girl." I roll my eyes in annoyance. Still horny and wanton. I know I need to take it easy for a few more days, but I can't help the way my body seems to call out to them. I really need to invest in some underwear too because my shorts being constantly soaked like this is going to become an issue.

I cross my arms and avoid eye contact, looking up at the ceiling. "It's not fair. You started it." I lean up on the bed, managing to hold back the wince of pain from my face this time. "You can't just be walking around here shirtless and shoving your cum soaked fingers in Lev's mouth and expect me *not* to react to that."

A devious smile splits across Damien's face, resembling an ornery child who just got his way, and I have to keep myself from rolling my eyes again. "We might not be able to fuck you, but we can still put on a show. What do you think, Lev? Think our little toy deserves a show?"

Lev's eyes rake down every inch of my body as if I'm already naked and laid out for him. "You gonna touch yourself for us, Lucky Charm?" I bite my lip as I grin from ear to fucking ear.

Damien swiftly moves to strip out of his pants and boxers. Then he pulls Lev up from the bed, helping him peel off his clothing from behind while I watch. My hand slides into my shorts, which happen to be already soaked from the car ride over here. And even though I'm still tender from the last orgasm, I'm fucking dripping for them.

"Take off those shorts, spread those legs, and move those fingers, baby girl," Damien says as he steps around a now fully naked Lev. "No one comes until I say so. No touching each other unless *I* say so."

I obey with a groan and just like always, Damien rewards me. "We are going to give you exactly what you need, Little Shadow. Don't get ahead of yourself. Enjoy it, it's the only break that little pussy of yours might be getting for a while." He leans down to kiss me on the forehead, and I sigh happily.

Then his lips find mine, crushing me in a punishing kiss before pulling away abruptly. He carefully removes my shirt, making sure the fabric doesn't catch on the stitches covering my torso. Damien's fingers trail down my legs when his gaze gets caught on the three cuts on top of my thigh.

He looks up into my eyes with a sadness that I also feel when I see them, and I suddenly want Lev to cover them with a piece of his art so we don't have to remember that day. Damien clears his throat, bending down between my spread legs and inhales.

"Fuck, you smell so sweet." He throws my shorts at Lev who catches them easily. "Doesn't she smell amazing, babe?"

Lev is already agreeing before doing the same. My clit is so swollen at this point. It's as if it's begging for attention as I try to rub my legs together. Except, the moment they start to close in, Damien yanks them apart, kneeling on the bed in front of me. He hungrily stares at my glistening pussy like it's his

favorite meal and he's about to devour every single morsel I have to give him.

Damien's eyes lock on mine as he dips his head, sticking out his long tongue and swiping along my folds. He doesn't use enough pressure to give me what I need, so my hips buck up in frustration. He smirks before flattening his tongue right where I want it and working me over until I'm lost in pleasure.

I swear I black out for a second just from how good it feels. Lev is standing beside me so I reach out to grab his length, wanting to rub my thumb over his piercing and watch his knees weaken, but Damien's head pops up and slaps my hand away.

"The two of you need to get better at listening," Damien says in that domineering tone of his. It should make me angry that he wants all the control here, but my traitorous pussy apparently disagrees because I can feel my arousal pooling with his words.

"Get on the bed next to her and lie down," Damien commands, and then disappears out of the room. I know it's wrong not to wait for permission, but when Lev's warm body slides next to mine, I lean in to kiss him again. The faintest taste of myself still lingers on his lips. Damien slams the door behind him, and we separate so fast Lev nearly falls off the bed.

I refrain from giggling when I see the serious look on Damien's face and the little toys in his hands. Rope and a small black ring are in one hand with what looks like a med kit, and the other holds a contraption I'm equally terrified and utterly blissed out to see. A black vibrating wand.

"Since you don't know how to keep your hands to yourself, I'm taking them out of the equation. If anything becomes too much, I want you to use the word 'vanilla' and everything stops. There will never be any anger or disappointment for stopping. I genuinely want you to use the word if you feel uncomfortable. Do you both understand?"

“Yes, sir,” we both say in tandem without missing a beat. Lev and I look at each other with a smile. I can’t help but swoon over how perfect they both are for me.

Damien nods his head in approval at our answer and walks up to the bed. He begins tying intricate knots around my wrists and arms. It’s not like handcuffs, nothing simple like that. It’s beautiful and looks like art. When he’s finished he pulls the rope above my head and the space between my arms disappears as the rope pulls them together fluidly.

“Too tight?” Damien asks before securing it to the bed. I take a moment to wiggle my fingers and stretch my shoulders, making sure blood flow isn’t being cut off anywhere before answering.

“It’s perfect.” I give a little tug just to see what happens and my arms squeeze tighter together but the moment I stop pulling, the rope loosens again. I’m surprised by how much I enjoy the feeling of the silk-like red rope. Half of my mind was concerned I would feel trapped again and have to use the damn safe word before this even started. Except, when I look up into Damien’s eyes, my mind is clear and I know I can trust him. He’s my monster and my sunshine. He will never hurt me.

I give myself over to the feeling as Damien moves over to Lev, tying him up with a black rope and going through the same movements to ensure nothing is too tight. He moves over to the med kit and removes a pair of scissors to place on the nightstand beside my head. Another reason I don’t freak out by being restrained. Damien knows what he’s doing, and he makes sure we’re safe in the process.

He gets on the bed at Lev’s feet and crawls up between his legs. Lev watches him in rapture. The ecstasy on their faces over each other is almost enough to have me exploding without either of them touching me.

Damien takes Lev’s cock in his hand and slowly works the ring down to the base of the shaft. Then he bends down and slides him into his mouth. I can see the moment he starts to

play with his piercing because Lev's back arches off the bed, and I rub my thighs together just to build some sort of friction.

The groan Damien lets out has Lev panting in under a minute, the sheets under me saturated in my arousal. I had no idea I could be this turned on just by watching them and I'm loving every second of it.

Damien's hand slides up my stomach while the other works Lev's length in tandem with the bob of his head. He pinches my nipple between his fingers, and now it's my turn to arch off the bed. Every inch of my body is in sensory overdrive as his fingers nearly vibrate along my center with how fast he's moving them.

Lev and I are panting so heavily I swear the room went from sixty-nine degrees to eighty-two with just the heat of our breaths alone. My brow has a sheen of sweat across it that isn't caused by withdrawal or pain for the first time in days, and I revel in it.

When Damien's hand moves lower to spread my folds apart with his two fingers, I'm not quite sure what I expected but it definitely wasn't him bending over Lev's leg to suck on my clit. I scream out, trying my best to hold back from coming because I know he wants that control. But he already has me so damn close to the edge.

The door to my room bursts open. Alexi comes in with a gun raised, startling us all. The moment he takes in the scene, and that my scream wasn't one of fear or pain, well at least not a bad pain, he lowers his weapon but stays standing at the end of my bed.

No one moves for what feels like five whole minutes, but then Damien's face lights up in that special way of his as he looks at Alexi. His lip tilts up in that half grin of his and goosebumps cover my flesh when Damien says, "You staying to watch the show, brother? I was just about to let our girl come."

I whimper in response to that, my legs already beginning to shake with need. Alexi's eyes snap to mine and when I don't protest, he pulls down his sweats to free his half-hard cock and

fists it. He moves gracefully to the seat just to the left of the footboard and says, "Proceed."

I can tell without a shadow of a doubt that this word irks Damien. How two Doms share a room I will never understand, but I am so damn eager to find out. Damien turns back to Lev, letting a line of spit slide out of his mouth and drop to Lev's cock.

Alexi lets out a raspy moan along with mine, just as turned on by the show of dominance as I am. I didn't think I would be one to love spit play, but my mind has done a one-eighty on that idea. Damien's other hand is still between my legs and when he looks back at me, he hitches a hand around my thigh and pulls until I'm spread open for him and Alexi to watch.

My cheeks heat even more. Damien hooks my leg around Lev's until we are using each other to keep our legs open for the hungry men watching. I turn to look at him to see if he's okay with this. I find his pupils blown wide and a look of bliss on his face that only deepens with each touch from Damien. He takes his hand around both of their cocks as he starts to pump them both up and down together.

Once he starts up a rhythm he grabs the wand and turns it on, eyeing me with that devilish grin.

"Do you want to play, Little Shadow?"

I bite my lip, equally hating vibrators as much as I love them. I'll always want to play. "Yes, sir."

His nostrils flare in response. He guides the wand to my chest, grazing over each sensitive nipple before moving down the center of my stomach. He moves the wand so the ball end is in the palm of his hand, then slowly sinks two fingers inside me while keeping the toy held to my clit.

I can hear Alexi suck in a sharp breath as he picks up the pace with his hand. Damien keeps his strokes even with the ones he's giving Lev, and I almost cry on the spot from how fucking good it all feels. Words get stuck in my throat as euphoria washes over me and I can't hold back anymore as the vibrations seem to overwhelm my entire being.

“Come for us, Little Shadow. Show them what a good girl you are for me.”

My pussy clenches around his fingers, pulling them in deeper. He lets go of Lev to put the wand right on my clit. I don't tumble over the edge, I catapult. I'm flying, screaming incoherent words as my orgasm surges out of me like a tsunami. Damien presses a button to change the rhythm of the vibrations just in time to send me into another climax the second I've finished the first. I swear it lasts forever.

My legs are shaking and my mind is blank. Utterly and completely blank. For a moment, there's no trauma, there's no mission, there's just nothing. Nothing but peace and the highest level of contentment I never knew was possible.

When I open my eyes, tears fall and I don't know why. I look over to see Damien and Lev coated in each other's release. Damien leans down to kiss Lev but instead of deepening the kiss Damien pulls back. They both look at me with worried expressions stamped on their faces.

Why am I crying?

Alexi comes over and carefully unties my hands, but no one speaks. I feel oddly vulnerable even though I had no problem exposing my most intimate parts to them, but me being naked and in tears feels entirely different.

Why the fuck am I crying?

There are no sobs, just soft silent tears streaming down my face. Alexi helps me sit up and hands me a water I didn't even realize was there.

“Why?” I get out in a raspy voice, and a small smile touches my lips with how blissed out I sound and feel. If I could just figure out what the fuck is up with these damn tears.

Alexi knows exactly what I'm asking and picks me up in his arms as he answers, “You're just having a subdrop, nothing too extreme. We will take care of you though. You did so good for us, Princess.”

I forgot about all the reading Damien had me do to stay distracted in the hospital about this lifestyle. I thought sub

drops didn't happen all that often, but apparently that was a poor assumption. Lev and Damien get up and by the time they've wiped themselves clean, my tears have stopped. I feel exhausted and satiated. The weird feeling in my head that's like it's a little too full that begins to fade.

It makes my eyes droop and when Lev comes to take me from Alexi's lap, I go to him without question. He carries me into the shower, and I let him wash my hair and body, letting out a contented sigh. He scrubs me until I feel squeaky clean. My skin comes out nice and pink everywhere that isn't injured.

I smile at him, and the look he gives me is one of adoration. He's gentle but firm as he dries me off and rubs my legs with lotion. I know I'm capable, but I let him because I also know it makes him feel useful.

When I get back to bed, Damien has a plate full of food waiting for me. Most of it is fairly bland, but I also haven't had a big appetite. I cross my legs on the bed and dig in. The gentle touches and attentiveness makes me feel so relaxed. Like I'm finally coming back to myself.

"I'm sorry for crying, I'm not really sure why that happened."

Damien's face falls from the casual happiness to a sad frown. "Subdrops are really normal considering everything going on. I'm honestly surprised it wasn't worse than that."

My eyes widen, and I regret not taking this topic more seriously for him. Once I read about kinks and scenes, I felt like I had a good general idea and would just learn on the go with him. Clearly that was not a good decision.

"To be honest," I say wincing slightly because I feel bad, "I didn't really think it was that big of a deal, so I skimmed. I'll take it more seriously next time."

I can tell he's frustrated at me for that but decides to let it go after a minute of tortuous silence. I try to pretend it doesn't bother me.

“I’ll be sending you my limits and full kink list, and so will Alexi. We already know most of the things to do to comfort you in a subdrop, but we also need to know your limits so we can respect them.”

I nod while looking down at my food, suddenly feeling even less hungry.

“I’m not angry, Little Shadow,” Damien says as he tilts my head up with his hand. “I don’t want to hurt you. I want to explore our limits together, and I feel awful for not making sure you were more aware of what all of this is. Limits are what helps prevent me from going too far. I have them as well. I want us to be open and honest about everything. Sex, life, all your emotions. None of us are men who want to own our woman, and we all know you’re someone who doesn’t want to be owned. So help us. Help us help you, okay?”

The sincerity behind his words has me falling a little more in love with him by the second. I want those things, all of them. But what if wanting them and a life of openness and honesty prevents them from ever truly being safe?

“What if I have to run?” I ask. “What if I have to run and leave you behind?”

He sits up then, getting right in my face as he pinches my chin between his fingers. Not enough to hurt but definitely enough to show the depth of his feelings on that idea.

“There is no place on this earth, not a single fucking one, where you will go without me. Not one. Promise me, Little Shadow”

I want to say it. I want to promise him that, but I also couldn’t live with myself if I was the reason anything happened to him.

“I need you to understand,” he growls, “that the only death I would accept in this world is one of growing old with you or one of sacrifice for you. You want us to understand that you make your own decisions. So do we. So promise me, promise you’ll stay.”

Tears flood my eyes with the idea of any of them getting hurt for me, but I keep them from spilling over and stop myself before it turns into a panic attack, which is a big sign I'm getting stronger and overcoming this withdrawal. I take a breath to make sure it's steady before I give him what he needs, even if it breaks a small piece of me to do it. Because I would *break* for these men, just like they would for me. And it's not fair for me to ask them to let me make my own choices and take away theirs.

"I swear I won't leave you, so long as you want me."

His body sags in relief, but I for one am done with the gloomy emotions. We've had our tears, we've had our fights, and now we've had *plenty* of orgasms. It's time for us to relax a little and just have some fun.

Damien looks at Lev, pointing a finger at him. "Don't think I've forgotten about your list. I expect a full BDSM checklist as soon as possible." Lev blushes and smiles at him.

"Yes, sir."

I hug him to my chest and then push back, getting up to take my plate to the kitchen. Damien reaches out to take it for me, but I pull it back.

"That's about enough babying for one day, thank you very much. We need to have some fun before we leave. While normally that means going a few rounds with the bag at the gym, I'm not there yet and won't pretend I am. So, call the calvary because we are having a movie night. I don't care where, but I want popcorn and I want laughter. Lots of laughter."

Damien smirks as he pulls out his phone, and I grin from ear to ear. He can be in charge during sex, but we both know who's in charge outside of that scene.

Me.



Chapter 15

I really need to stop thinking that things can't get worse around here. Alexi set up a room in the library with a huge screen while Arrow and Havoc moved couches into it so we could all have a movie night. Nessa came too. Laney sat tucked under Arrow's arm the whole time while Havoc was on her other side acting like one of us was going to come for her. It's weird to me that Havoc wants to protect her after what she did, but maybe he understands it better than I do.

Either way, the tension between her and Evie eases as we watch a chick flick about two people who randomly got married in Vegas and had to find a way to split the jackpot money so they could get a divorce. The girls burst out laughing every time her friend gets trigger-happy and punches guys in the dick while every man in the room winces and groans.

But we all still sit through it. Even Alexi, who loathes chick flicks. It might have had something to do with Evie's head in his lap the entire time though.

Damien orders pizza half way through the movie for everyone, and I prepare myself to endure the wrath of Evie over the pineapple on mine.

"I still can't get over the fact you eat that," she says as she takes a bite that should be way too big for her mouth. *She's so cute.*

"I can't be the only one in this room that can appreciate pineapple on pizza! This shit slaps!"

Arrow chimes in, coming to my aid. "Dude, that stuff is delicious. I would have gotten it myself, but I knew this little brat would have had a fit." He nudges Laney and Havoc lifts a brow at him.

"That's because it's disgusting." Laney throws her arms out in exaggeration.

"I don't think I've ever tried it," Havoc says.

I hand him a piece and mentally highlight Arrow as a man I'd like to get to know because he clearly knows good food.

Havoc takes a bite and shrugs. "It's not that bad, but I also wouldn't order it myself." He hands the rest of the piece back to me. "E, you'll eat nearly anything, but you won't eat that?"

Evie sets down her plate, her face serious. "I have literally been beaten and starved for days on end, and I would have thrown that out of the window before eating it. It's an abomination."

"I agree," Alexi says. "I would rather drink wine out of a red solo cup than eat that trash." He looks at the pizza like it personally offended him.

"You all have immature palates," I say to them.

Havoc barks out a laugh and nearly rolls over in hysterics. Evie joins him and soon, we are all nearly choking on our food. Then, Boris walks in, and the room goes deadly silent.

“Care if I join you?” he asks, looking out of place. I’ve never seen him look anything less than a hundred percent confident.

Everyone looks around, and then our eyes land on Evie. She swallows her bite and assesses him. “On one condition. Help us settle a little debate. Does pineapple belong on pizza?”

He smiles then sits on the floor with us. “Of course, it’s delicious.”

Alexi shakes his head at him. “And here I thought we were related.”

Boris actually seems bothered by that, but I don’t let it linger. Instead, I offer him a piece of my superior pizza, which he happily takes. I don’t know how, but everything seems to fall into place after that. It all seems easy, like we were always meant to have this with each other.

When we get back to the suite, I throw things together to finish packing. Entering the closet, I go to the safe in the back to grab the hard drives to take them home and secure them. However, when I go to place my hand on the scanner, the door flops open before the lights even graze my pinky finger. Dread pools in my stomach the moment I realize the safe is completely empty.

My fingers dig into my white hair and pull as I take a breath. *This cannot be fucking happening right now.* I pace my closet floor, trying to think of any way I can protect that information now that it’s been stolen. I secured it the best way I knew how, the only ones who’ve ever really gone up against my hacking and happened to circumvent my skills were Laney and Evie.

My hands start to shake, knowing that they have everything they need to destroy us. Everything we built our lives preparing to take over and make better. *Everything.*

“Dammit!” I yell without really meaning to.

Damien comes in less than a minute later, clearly having heard me from our shared wall. He takes one look at me, then sees the empty safe and all of the tension that had left us

during the movie, sitting on the couch and getting to share our girl, comes back tenfold.

Alexi walks in a moment later followed by Evie. She goes pale, and I'm sure her thoughts are that we are about to punish her for this. After everything that's happened, I'm sure that's exactly what I'd be thinking.

Alexi grabs her and for a second I think he just might do what we both fear.

"This isn't your fault," he says, pulling her into his chest. Her shoulders visibly relax, and he continues. "How well were they protected? Did they have a kill switch?"

"There is a kill switch on all but one, the only reason is that it's the one I planned to give to my father and he isn't nearly as skilled at navigating them as I am. If they are good enough to maneuver around them, they will have it all, but the one intended for my father only has the banking information he needs. And that can be changed again easily enough."

"They can't," Evie pipes in. "I'm their best and one of their only hackers. The only man who can run circles around my coding is Mac, but Havoc said he left with him and went into hiding after he found out about the tracker."

Relief floods me knowing that. Still, there are other hackers out there I'm sure he can find. It's just a matter of time.

"I'll start planning the banking mess now and get our stuff moved again. I'm half tempted to take the deal to buy the bank, but I don't want the people it comes with."

Alexi nods, we agreed we would avoid shady deals unless we really needed them. I don't think we're there yet, but at least we know we have the option. Sitting down at my computers, I get straight to work. The funds were only activated by my father last week, so at least it's easy to rearrange things. I'll have to tell Boris about it eventually though.

Damien and Alexi leave me to it, but Evie hovers, clearly worried about me. I turn in my chair as my servers boot up and pull her to sit in my lap before turning back to them. We are

past the point of hiding shit from one another, and I want to feel her warm body against mine.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly, making my fingers freeze in their pursuit.

Her head is cast down like she’s blaming herself.

“Lucky Charm, don’t do that. We’re past this. Now tuck that sweet little ass into me so I have something to look forward to when I’m done here.”

A small laugh leaves her lips, and she scoots closer while one of my hands pulls her as tight to me as she can possibly be. She’s reading the code and watching my movements closely. When I make an error she stops me and helps backtrack. With her help, I don’t think anyone will be able to get ahold of our funds again.

“Alexi told me about the hard drives,” Havoc says, walking into the room. Alexi follows behind him, and I turn us in my chair so we can all talk, but I don’t let Evie leave my lap.

“Do you think anyone will be able to get into them?” I ask.

“Evie was right when she said she and Mac are the best. Adrik doesn’t put a lot of stock into his online presence since most of our jobs are handed down by word of mouth to prevent paper trails of any kind. He knows a lot of people though, which is why I’m planning to sneak back in and bring them back to you.”

Evie shoots to stand, but Alexi speaks first.

“That’s too risky and we all know it. What if you get caught? We don’t have the capability to rescue you, not with the small number of people we can actually trust right now.”

“I agree,” Evie says, walking up to stand in front of him. He’s easily a foot taller than her, but you can see that she’s in no way intimidated by him.

“You and I are the only ones who know what my uncle can do— everything he’s capable of. You’re too much of an asset.”

“Then I’m coming with you,” Havoc replies instantly. “You’re not going to Russia or running off without me.”

His face is stern, but I can see the care he holds for her in it. She’s precious to him, and he doesn’t want to lose her. *I know the feeling.*

“I highly doubt my father will allow a former Shade to come visit his estate,” Alexi scoffs.

“E is a former Shade. He’s got no issues with her. I’ll initiate into his organization if that’s what it takes to prove my loyalty.”

“You can’t just request to join, it’s not that simple,” Alexi says.

“Do you really want to work for Boris? Or these guys when Boris steps down?” Evie asks, throwing her hand out to gesture towards Alexi and me, as if working for us is such a horrible thing.

“I want to do whatever I have to do to keep you safe. I’m not leaving you.”

Alexi seems to see Havoc isn’t going to change his mind and is about as stubborn as he is.

“You can go through initiations with my new alpha team when we arrive. No mess ups, no failures, and I’ll think about where I’m going to assign you once I get reports back.”

Evie turns to Alexi. “That’s insane. Havoc would have been number two in the Shades until his death, he’s not going to want to do grunt work just because I’m there.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to do, E. You never left me; I’m not leaving you.”

That phrase seems to mean something more to Evie and when she turns to look at him, I can see the emotions swirling in both of their eyes. I don’t love that she has a history with this man that I know nothing about, but I do know without question he will fight for her even if it costs him his life.

“Damien will need a number two to manage his tactical team. If you pass initiation, it’s yours,” I offer, trying to give

them both something to show I understand their need to be together.

Havoc surely has more knowledge and experience in hunting and torturing targets than almost any of our men.

I probably shouldn't offer the position since it's not mine to give away, but I have a strong feeling that with enough convincing Damien won't mind. Havoc gives me a nod and claps Alexi on the shoulder in thanks.

Evie hugs me before moving to Alexi and giving him a small kiss. He leans over her, and it's then that I realize, I've never really seen him kiss a girl besides Evie. His face is soft when he looks at her, such a dramatic contrast from what I'm used to seeing that I almost laugh.

"Do you want us to call you by your real name?" I ask Evie, realizing when Havoc called her 'E' that we haven't really talked about her identity. She takes a step back to think.

"I feel like you calling me anything else would feel weird. My name might be Eydis, but most of the guys at the compound called me E like Havoc. It's weird, but Eydis feels like someone I used to be. Evie feels like who I am now."

"I like Evie, but I like Lucky Charm the most," I tell her with a grin.

We all rarely call her by her name anyways, but I do want to know what she would prefer and give her the choice. I always want her to have a choice.

"One last thing before we finish packing to get ready for tomorrow," I say to them. Since Damien is busy at the gym, I decide now is a good time to bring this up.

"The flight tomorrow might get a little rough. Damien hasn't been sober much when he's near his father, and he owns a house on the estate. Damiens dad likely won't be there much during the month. He usually deals with our customers in Spain over the holidays; Damien might still try to shut down. We should try to avoid having alcohol around if possible."

Evie's face falls as she nods. She's seen him angry, just not the way he can be around his father. Typically, we don't tiptoe

around him, but I'm not big on drinking, and Alexi has his wine with meals. The dry red drink has never really tempted Damien in the past. Evie doesn't seem to drink much either, so it's less of a tiptoe and more of an effort to understand the temptation.

Alexi steps in, already having a plan in place for this. "I spoke to my father about it before and he will keep it out of the dining areas. If D's going to drink, then he's going to have to go get it himself."

"Do we have to stay with your father?" Evie asks Alexi. "Don't you guys have your own place?"

"We do," I offer, "but it's part of Boris' office building, and we don't know where your uncle has eyes. It would be next to impossible to get you in and out unseen."

"My father's estate is heavily guarded. No one is on the property that wasn't basically born into their position. It's safer there, and you'll actually be able to go outside," Alexi adds.

"I know the whole point is for me to be unseen so I can get away from all of this, but being in a cage isn't exactly how I was hoping to spend my life."

"It's a five hundred acre estate with four mansions, one of which is practically a castle. There is also a farm and a lake. It's hardly a cage," Alexi says, rolling his eyes like she's being a dramatic princess. I can see what she means though. A gilded cage is still a cage.

"It's only temporary," I remind her as I pull her close.

I have no idea how we'll be able to come up with a plan where we all run and actually stay hidden from multiple world-renowned criminal organizations, but we sure as hell are going to try.

She leans into me, and the scent of strawberries and vanilla fills my senses like a comfort I didn't know I needed.

"Besides, there's no way in hell you're leaving us behind, and we all know Damien can't be caged," I joke.

She laughs into my shoulder and pulls me impossibly closer to her. “Promise?” she asks. “Promise you’re coming too, all of you?”

“I promise, Lucky Charm.”

“I promise too, Princess,” Alexi chimes in, and I can’t help but let that little space in my chest I refuse to acknowledge swell with just a little bit of the most dangerous feeling out there.

Hope.



Chapter 16

I sit there and watch her as my mind tries to push itself into a fog. If I can convince myself I'm not here enough in my head, maybe I won't have to go home and face the man who raised me. My body feels like it's shutting down.

Evie is going over her schedule with Nessa and telling her about her pace on runs. Nessa's plan is to go through Evie's routine during the day then in the evenings, she will leave the tracker in the bed and scout the island making sure no one is left.

Just the idea of my father seeing Evie, the thoughts he will have. My jaw clenches painfully thinking about the way he preys on younger women. He never minded bringing them to the house and showing them off, just like he never minded beating the shit out of them when he was done using them.

My mind tries to detach from a world where my father gets to live and tries to focus on the idea of what it will be like when we finally take over. Just a few more years until I won't have to deal with him any longer, and he can retire off to an island in the middle of no where to drink himself to death while leaving me the fuck alone.

As soon as Evie hugs Nessa goodbye, she takes my hand in hers and it clears some of the fog. Enough that I can give her a reassuring smile.

I have to remember she's nervous too, and it brings just a little bit of comfort knowing I'm not alone in this. She looks up at me, squeezing my hand before pushing up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. I don't know if she knows how I'm feeling or if she can just tell that I'm off my game. By now, I'd be offering sarcastic remarks about the fact that we're three minutes behind, which is normally something I'd give Alexi so much shit about.

In my haze I don't even realize we have made it to the plane. If it weren't for Evie holding onto me and directing my movements, I might still be in bed even now.

Alexi makes sure our bikes are loaded carefully in the cargo bay while we head up to the top level of the jet. There are two bedrooms and a large lounge area. The kitchen staff are prepping a meal for us all since it's early, and we all know Evie's favorite meal of the day is breakfast. She practically hums when she smells the bacon and some of my unease slips away as I fully take her in.

Her shirt says "I'm a fucking delight" and I actually laugh out loud when I notice it. She sees me looking at her and does a small spin before sitting on one of the white leather couches in the lounge area.

"What do you think?" she asks, mischief alight in her eyes.

Just as I'm about to answer, Lev appears behind me and claps me on the back before throwing a bag in one of the rooms.

“What’s that for?” I ask him, curious as to what he needs on this four-hour plane ride that he couldn’t have left below.

“You’ll see,” he says with a wink before looking at Evie.

These two are up to something. The idea is almost enough to pull me from the tornado of emotions rolling in my head. Lev leans down and kisses Evie on the forehead while she turns into a puddle at his feet. Watching the way he loves her makes my skin feel like it’s glowing with happiness.

“You’re by me, Sunshine,” Evie says, patting the spot beside her.

Lev pushes himself in after me, sandwiching me in. I throw my arms around them and try to let myself relax in the way I usually do when my better halves are next to me. It’s easy enough listening to them bicker, and then watching Evie inhale her breakfast like she’s been starving for years.

She eyes my last piece of bacon like she might steal it. Even though I have next to no appetite, I quickly shove half of it into my mouth, letting the other half hang out. Without hesitation, she climbs on my lap and looks me in the eyes as she wraps her mouth along the greasy meat, moaning as she bites down.

My dick literally jumps in my pants at the move, and I finish chewing with a grin on my face so large you would have no idea I’m heading right back into my tormenter’s presence.

The thought has my face faltering. Evie catches it immediately. She doesn’t let me dwell on it long though because she cups my face in her hands and kisses me like she’s starved for my mouth as much as she was for the literal pound of bacon she just devoured.

Her tongue slips in and Laney groans from the other side of the plane.

“There are rooms, Evie, use them,” Laney says sarcastically.

I don’t give her a moment to think about moving away from me though. I need this. I need her. I need an anchor.

Cupping her ass in my hands, I stand as she wraps her legs around me. We head to the room Lev threw his bag in as I hear the cabin door shut. Havoc makes snide comments about Evie's life choices. I only just hear Alexi threaten bodily harm just before I kick the door shut behind us.

I don't bother locking it, leaving the invitation open for Lev or Alexi if they want to join. I love it when I have my little shadow all to myself, but I also love to share her. The look that crosses her face as someone else brings her pleasure is something I marvel at, and I won't deny either of us that satisfaction.

Keeping her on top of me, I move us further back onto the bed. I love being in charge; I need it most of the time. But right now, I just want to enjoy my girl.

I'm still worried about her injuries and if she's on top, she has more control with her body. I also don't have her limits list yet, and I don't know if I want to make everything a *scene* with her. Everything we do comes so naturally that I don't find myself worried about all the extra stuff.

She grinds down on my painfully hard dick and my body craves to claim her. The gasp of pleasure she gives me when the head hits her sensitive clit through our pants is enough to have me questioning letting her have control. Just as I think about flipping her over, the door opens and Lev strides in with a cocksure smile on his face.

Evie looks back at him, her devious eyes alight with that spark of chaos and goosebumps form on my skin.

“Get the bag, Ghost, I think Damien wants to play.”

I look up at our girl and tilt my head slightly.

“I read your list,” she says, “and I know you like being in charge, but there was one thing on there that really caught my attention. I'll have my list to you soon, but I want to try a few things first to better gauge what I'm comfortable with. Is that alright?”

“Of course that's alright,” I sit up to peck her on the lips. “Thank you for taking this seriously and for trusting me.”

Her cheeks turn red and I smile like an idiot as I drink her in. She takes off her shirt and tosses it across the room, then she helps me remove mine. As her body shimmies down my torso, her nipples graze my abs. The sensation has my cock pressing so tightly against my pants that it hurts. Luckily, as she moves down, she takes my pants with her off the bed. Once she's standing, she stares at my dick in fascination. It jerks under her gaze, begging for her to touch it.

“So, I saw on your list that you enjoy edging as much as you like to be edged,” Evie says as Lev comes to my side with leather cuffs. “And you enjoy bondage. Do you trust us, Sunshine?”

I obediently give him my wrist for him to strap them in. “Yes,” I say as Lev's eyes light up under my submission. Evie teases her nipples as she watches us until they pebble into tight peaks. I want to suck on them, nip at them until she's screaming.

But I also want them to feel free to play and learn and explore. I love being a Dom, almost as much as I love teaching others new things about the pleasure of their bodies. And the scene they're setting already has precum leaking from me in rivulets.

“But neither of those are what intrigued me the most.”

Evie climbs up on top of me again, having rid herself of her own pants. As she settles on top of my dick I can already feel her wet heat dripping for me. Lev takes his time securing my hands and feet and leaving me spread open for them.

“So, what is it you want to try my Little Shadow?” I ask, already breathless and willing to beg her to do her worst.

“I want to try milking,” she says against my lips. “I want to see you dripping for me as much as I'm constantly dripping for you.”

She punctuates her words by rubbing her slickness over my dick. My hips buck up into her instinctively.

“Fuck,” I breathe, so turned on it almost hurts.

“You ready, Sunshine?”

Lev hands her something and I already have an idea of what it is. As she reaches between us, the cool lube graces my ass, and I can't help but groan at the realization of what's about to happen.

Slowly, Evie takes my dick in her hands and leans down to spit on it. Lev watches her in fascination as he removes his clothes. I get the pleasure of drinking them both in while she pushes the prostate stimulator deep into my ass and turns on the pumping vibrations.

I throw my head back as the plane begins to take off and I feel like I'm flying myself. Euphoria and weightlessness consume me until my mind clears and all that matters are the people right here with me. I embrace it all and soak in the feeling of us being together and safe.

Evie continues to pump my dick while Lev palms himself, watching her work. Evie eyes him for a moment, then gets down from the bed to approach Lev. She reaches out and takes his dick in her hand, then lowers herself to her knees in front of him. Watching them together is like getting my own personal show. They are both perfection. I watch as she takes him to the back of her throat, then pulls all the way off to tongue his piercing. His legs begin to shake as she continues to work him and I swear I've never been more hard in my life.

Before Lev can finish, she pulls off and comes back to the bed, gesturing for Lev to join us. She has him get on top of me while facing her so that our dicks rub together. The feeling of the weight of his body and the heat of his dick sliding over mine has my eyes rolling to the back of my head in ecstasy.

Evie takes both hands and pushes our cocks together. In only seconds I'm spilling all over her fingers. I can see Lev's eyes on her movements in the vanity mirror as I watch Evie curiously using my cum to lube up both of our dicks together. Like the goddess she is, I swear I walk through the pearly gates of Olympus when she starts jerking us off at the same time.

Lev's hips buck into her as he rides my lap. The noises we make are like a symphony of lust and pure need swirling

around us. The weight of Lev above me, the sight of his tattooed back bowing in pleasure makes my knees weak. My legs start to shake almost as forcefully as the vibrations in my ass. I can feel the moment the plane reaches altitude because my head swims. The blissful feeling is almost too good to be true.

Evie lets out a groan right when I feel Lev pulse along my length. Ropes of cum shoot out and I nearly come with him. I'm barely able to hold back. My cock weeps a little in rebuttal, but I wait like she asked. I want everything my little shadow has to give me.

The prostate stimulator is still pumping when Lev climbs off of me. I want to protest at the loss of heat, but he covers me again a moment later, crashing his lips to mine. More cum leaks out of me as I tremble under her touch, and I hope this milking is everything my girl wants. When Lev pulls back and gets up, I see my girl's eyes. Her pupils are blown, almost to black. I smirk, loving this just as much as she is.

She has Lev's cum between her fingers as she works my dick up and down before twisting around the head a few times. I whimper like a fucking cat in heat when Lev trails his fingers down my chest then kisses our girl. I try to hold back with everything in me.

"I know, Sunshine, I know, let me make you feel good," Evie says as she removes her hand. Lev moves to get behind Evie on the bed as she moves up, straddling my length while she hovers just an inch above me. "You don't come until I do, got it big guy?"

I nod as I jerk my hips up, impatient to bury myself inside of her, but she's having none of it. She slides her hand between her legs. I can tell from here she's dripping for me just like she said. She rubs her hand around, spreading her folds and getting her fingers nice and wet before bringing them to my lips.

"Taste what you do to me, what you all do to me."

I open instinctively and the second her taste hits my tongue, I go feral. I'm like a man starved, licking every inch of her

skin just to get more of her. She's like a drug, my drug, and I want to taste her forever.

Her eyes light up as I look at her; I know then— this girl is it for me. She's everything I've ever wanted and everything I'll ever need. She saw my darkness consume me and instead of leaving it to fester, she jumped into the deep end with me.

When she lowers herself onto my dick, a gasp escapes her as she clenches tight and I hum around her fingers in response. The moment she pulls her fingers free, our panting fills the room again. But she goes slow, appreciating every stroke until I can't hold my feelings back anymore. She's it for me and I need her to know that she holds every piece of my heart.

“Marry me, Little Shadow?” I ask as I thrust my hips up into her, a promise of a future full of fucking and loving in every way I know how.

She pauses, looking down at me. I feel my body pale because as much as I wanted to ask, I also never imagined what it would feel like for her to say no. Lev's hands are still on her hips, and he looks between us with an odd look on his face. I feel like a dick right now because I never asked him about it. Shit, I never even asked myself about it to be honest; It just felt right.

But when Lev moves his lips to kiss her neck, he whispers words that has the blood returning to my face.

“Marry us?” he asks her as he kisses up her neck and turns her back into mush between us.

It feels wrong that Alexi isn't here to ask her too... if he wanted. They can have their own moment if he wishes. This is ours.

“I told you I won't pick between you,” she says, voice serious even with her eyes hooded in lust.

I rock my hips slowly, moving inside her while I say what I need with no doubt in my mind.

“Then don't. Marry us—all of us. Alexi can ask you when he's ready. If he ever is. But I'm ready now. I've already made my choice and it's you, Little Shadow. It's always been you.”

The smile she gives me makes my heart ache. With tears building in her eyes, the answer could just as easily be a no as it could be a yes. She rocks with me, and as Lev's hands flex on her hips before trailing up her body, she finally gives us an answer.

“Okay.”

“What was that, Lucky Charm?” Lev asks as he trails his hand down to her clit. His middle fingers start rubbing tight circles. Her back arches as she rides my dick like a woman possessed by a sex goddess. “I think we need to hear you say that again.”

“Yes,” she nearly screams. “Oh gods, yes, I'll marry you. Both of you. Come with me, Sunshine.”

Her orgasm rips through her, and I watch in awe as my girl falls apart on top of me with the man I love holding her in his arms. They are mine, now and forever.

I come with her, and she crashes her lips down to mine, sealing it with a kiss I'll never forget. She tilts her head to the side, then Lev kisses me next, a smile on his face so large I can feel his lips tilting up as he deepens it and sandwiches our girl between us.

Before I know it, the three of us have our tongues tangled together and I swear I've never looked forward to coming home before. But maybe this time will be different. It has to be. With my new family at my side, what could go wrong?



Chapter 17

When we land, I feel like I'm in a trance. I just said I would marry Lev and Damien, and I find I can't shake the smile from my face. We get into an armored black car that takes us to the insane mansion Alexi had mentioned. Alexi sits next to me with my hand in his for the whole ride, pointing out areas on the property that might be fun to explore while I'm here. I'm definitely exhausted after our little sex marathon, but the lake and the race track look so tempting.

As my eyes start to feel heavy, I lean into Alexi, letting my head rest on his shoulder. He's stiff at first, but as I nuzzle into him, he loosens up. When we arrive, he holds the door open for me and takes my hand as we get out.

"Welcome to my home, Princess."

My eyes widen at the sight before me. The palace is like something straight out of a fucking Disney princess movie. It's even bigger standing up close. I should have known it was huge, based on the two helicopter pads on the roof we could see flying in, but holy ever loving fuck.

My jaw literally falls open at the sight, and I'm in awe that a child grew up in this home without getting lost or nearly starving to death before a maid of some sort found him.

"You weren't kidding, Batman. Holy shit. I thought my uncle had a mansion, but this monstrosity is something else."

Alexi smirks at me while leading me inside with his hand on the small of my back.

"Wait, my bags," I say as I turn to grab them. Alexi just turns me in his arms while Lev and Damien get out of the back of their car and Havoc and Laney step out of theirs.

"We have people that will bring them to your room," he says dismissively.

"I can carry my own bags."

My attitude is strong because no one deserves to wait on me without a please and thank you at the very least. Alexi just shakes his head and pushes me along.

We wind through the massive space. There is no way in hell I'll be able to find my way back to the door to get my bags, even if I did manage to slip past my guard dogs at this point. When we reach a rounded corridor with three doors, I tilt my head to the side.

"Am I staying in one of your rooms?" I ask.

"No," Alexi responds, moving to a door. "My room is through those doors." He points to double doors I had assumed lead to another hallway and I roll my eyes.

"The king's suite, then?" I say as a joke, and he actually smiles. I find myself nearly giddy, knowing I was able to make Alexi Mikhaus smile.

"Something like that. But if that is true, then this would be the princess suite."

He opens the door next to his; As I step through, it's like I'm transported into another realm. Gold accents adorn everything except the bedding, which is black as night with a soft shimmer and super fluffy black pillows. The nightstand has a holder for my blades, and the canopy bed glistens with black curtains.

A massive television sits on the far wall that I already know will be perfect for movie night and a small kitchenette with popcorn sitting by a microwave is ready for just that. The door to the closet is open, and I can already see an array of dresses along with an array of black shorts and leggings stacked to the ceiling.

I almost squeal as I enter the bathroom to find a shower large enough to fit ten people and a giant bathtub in the center. A display of strawberry-scented soaps line the wall, and I suddenly realize just how much attention Alexi has paid to my preferences. Everything I've ever cared about or could wish for is in this room. When I walk out of the bathroom with tears in my eyes to find my three guys there, I know that statement couldn't be more true.

My uncle may have taken care of me, but he never paid attention like this. No one's ever paid attention like this before.

I wrap my arms around Alexi and hold back a sob because I don't want him to think even for a second anything is wrong here. This means more to me than anything. He saw me—every single part. He doesn't care that I need my blades by me when I sleep, even if that means I could wake up and hurt one of them by accident. He knew I wouldn't just wear dresses for him and made sure I had more clothes than just my two duffels could fit. Somehow, he must know that I haven't been able to call a place mine for a very long time.

“Thank you,” I say into his chest, my voice dripping with all of the emotions I feel. But instead of a smug remark about how well he did, he just wraps his arms around me tighter.

“Anything for you, Princess.”



It's been three days, and while I still adore the room Alexi crafted for me, I'm tired of feeling stuck inside these walls. Lev and Damien sleep with me every night. We haven't told Alexi about them proposing, but I'm starting to think it was just a heat of the moment thing because no one has talked about it since. I can't seem to go out for a walk or even down the hall without one of the guys or Laney finding me to 'keep me company'. Even when I stay in my room and sit to sharpen my new blades, someone comes in.

Laney is here now, sitting on the bed with me, and she can tell I'm not feeling like myself. Her and I have worked on rekindling our friendship. Now that I've been able to take a step back and see all of the things Laney has done for me I understand why she did it. That doesn't mean I'm happy about it but I want to start letting my anger go. I want to know that I can trust people and I'm working on trusting Laney again.

"What do you want to do today, girl?" she asks, sensing my mood. I find myself avoiding her gaze as I respond.

"Not to be rude, but I kinda want to be alone today." I try to say it without an attitude, but when I look up to see her face, I know I royally fucked that up.

Her phone pings for the twentieth time in the past 10 minutes, and her cheeks heat as she reads the message.

"Who's got you all hot and bothered?" I ask, hoping gossip will take the edge off of feeling trapped.

Her cheeks get even darker as she shows me her phone. "Arrow."

Arrow: I want to paint those cheeks of yours red with my handprint baby girl.

Laney: I prefer a flogger, though your hands do have a wide span, maybe they will feel better.

Arrow: That's it, I'm on the next flight out to Russia. Boris can shove his orders to stay here up his ass.

Laney: Well, we don't want to get caught sir. I could be expelled.

Arrow: Oh, my dirty girl, I'm the Dean. I can assure you, you'll be staying right here, within my reach, for as long as I can keep you.

My cheeks heat reading their conversation when a new bubble pops up. I assume it's Arrow, but when I see Alexi's name, the hairs on my neck stand up.

Alexi: Status update. Where is she? How is she?

"Laney?" I question, pushing the phone back towards her.

"For the record, I told him it was a stupid idea."

"What was a stupid idea?" I already know the answer, but I want to know why she was going along with it knowing how it would make me feel. She explains how Alexi talked to her and the only way he would let her come stay was if she stayed with me and helped him track me.

My face blazes with rage and embarrassment. He couldn't trust me, so he made sure I had a babysitter.

"Tell him there's an emergency, and he needs to get here now. By the time he's here, you might need to be gone."

Laney follows my directions, hugging me before she leaves and throwing me a wink. "Give him hell."

"Oh, I plan to, Firecracker. Now get out of here before you see the dark knight breaking down doors."

She leaves with a pep in her step, and I can't help but think she planned this. She might have been texting Arrow, but she knew Alexi would be checking in on the hour and showed me her phone anyway. I can't help but grin at that thought. Some of the ache left in my chest eases now that I'm able to see she's firmly on my side.

Less than a minute after Laney leaves, Alexi comes charging through my door with his gun in hand. I'm three feet from the entrance with my arms crossed and when he takes me in, he slides his gun back into the holster on his chest.

"So, she told you?" he asks, not an ounce of remorse in his tone. In fact, he sounds more pissed off than I am. But he sure as fuck has no right to feel that way.

“No, I’m just not an idiot. Did you really think this would work? Just never leave me alone again because you can’t trust me?”

He tilts his head in confusion as if I’m reading the whole scenario wrong. *Apparently, I am.*

“You think I don’t trust you?” he asks, moving toward me until my legs hit the foot of the bed. I nearly collapse with the weight of his stare, but I hold my ground. I’ve told him before I won’t bow to him, and sitting feels a little too much like I’m at his mercy.

“What am I supposed to think? You got me a babysitter because apparently I’m not trusted enough to be alone? That even in this huge ass house, this huge fucking property, I can’t just have some space to myself. Fuck, I’m not gonna run, but I sure as hell need to be able to breathe sometimes.”

“I don’t think you’re going to run,” he says as if I’m being an ignorant child. “I think someone is after you, and I’m trying to protect you and keep you safe. They are not only here for your protection, but also as a way to call for help should something happen. As much as I’d like to think this place is safe, I also don’t trust anyone with you except for us and *maybe* Laney.”

“I don’t need anyone to protect me, Alexi, I can do that myself!” I scream.

He grabs my wrist as I try to walk away and pulls me into his body.

“Oh yeah, how well did that work out last time?” He doesn’t let me answer before he’s powering through again. “I will not fail you again. I will not let someone else take what’s mine. I will not watch the only people I care about in this life crumble without you. I *will* keep you safe!”

We glare at each other and I think of all the ways I could hurt him with my words. Except, I know this isn’t the way to get through to him, so I close my eyes, not out of submission, but to collect my thoughts.

“I will not be locked in a cage, Batman. So don’t make me choose between you and being free. Because you won’t like the choice I make.”

When I open my eyes, I wish I hadn’t. Because the hurt reflected back at me is enough to actually sting. But I meant every word, and I’m not backing down just because the truth hurts.

He takes a deep controlled breath, loosening his grip around my wrist. I can see the moment he starts to understand things from my perspective because his shoulders relax.

“Come with me?” he asks gently. I give into him and his pull as he guides me down the halls, winding through until we get to an elevator. Yes, a fucking elevator.

When the doors open, a garage comes into view with at least twenty shiny cars of all different makes and models before us, as well as a row of bikes. I recognize the black Ducati immediately and follow behind Alexi as he heads straight to it. It’s freezing outside, but I find myself nearly bouncing with joy when he pulls out black windbreakers, helmets, and gloves for the two of us.

“You’re taking me for a ride?” I ask, and he smirks at me.

“You wanted to learn, I’m gonna teach you. But first I want to take you to my favorite spot.”

I nod eagerly as I put everything on. Alexi checks over it all to make sure I’m secure. He taps a button on the side and I hear the pop of a speaker going live.

“Pick the music,” he says, handing me his phone.

I flip through some playlists before I click on the perfect song right as we’re about to get on, but he hits pause as he gets adjusted. When I move to get behind him, he wraps his hand around mine and pulls me to the front.

“Here,” he says. I carefully slide my leg around the front of the bike and settle my ass into his crotch. The heat of his front warms up my back. Goosebumps pebble on my flesh at just how intimate this all feels. Alexi wraps a hand around my

middle and pulls me to him even tighter, leaving no question about how big his dick is, even in this cold as fuck weather.

“I’m gonna take it slow, then I’ll let you take the handles as we go. Sound like a plan, Princess?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I say, and he freezes behind me. A gloved hand wraps around my hip and squeezes.

“Don’t call me that,” he growls. The speaker in my ear has me confused if it’s a good or a bad growl. “Not unless you want everything that comes with it.” He grinds himself into my ass and I gasp, unable to hold back just how much of him I feel.

Before I can say anything, he flips on the music and revs the engine, speeding out of the garage toward the track. I have no idea what he meant by taking it slow because the wind whips around us with the force of a hurricane. All of a sudden, I’m lost in the feeling of flying.

Slayer by Bryce Savage comes over the speaker, and I lean into each rev of the engine as we turn so hard our knees nearly hit the pavement. I feel lost and found all at the same time. The air around me feels lighter than it ever has. For just a moment, I forget everything and just exist in the total bliss of this weightlessness. It’s freedom in the purest form. With my demon at my back, I feel like I could take on the world. Maybe even more so with him there.

“Feeling free yet, Princess?” Alexi asks over the song and I whoop in response, throwing my hands up in the air when we hit the straightaway.

I hear his deep chuckle in my ears and everything feels right. I feel whole and free and Alexi gave that to me. My heart squeezes for him. I might not have told him that I love him, and him locking me up in a cage isn’t okay, but I can see why he did it. In this moment, I do love him. I’m just not ready to tell him that.

He drives us around for a while before we make our way up through the woods to a small cabin that seems to be built into the side of a hill. The view of smoke curling up from a

chimney greets us as we pull up to the front and Alexi cuts the gas.

“Where are we?” I ask as I take off my helmet. Alexi does the same.

I find myself in awe of the scenery. Everything looks so fresh and luscious even in the dead of winter.

“This is where I go to think,” he tells me as he removes his gloves. “I thought maybe you could use it too, if you needed.”

He shrugs, walking up to the door and knocking the dirt off his shoes before he opens it. I do the same, following him inside. Alexi carefully removes his jacket and seems to arrange it a specific way as he hangs it by the door and then does the same with mine. A few months ago, I’d make a snide comment about him being particular, but now that I know he has to have things a certain way to feel in control and content, I’m sure as fuck not going to poke at that.

The cabin is cozy and warm, a fresh fire crackling in the fireplace and two large cozy chairs beside it. It’s an open floor plan with a huge king sized bed that sits in the back with a small kitchen to the side. I take it all in as I warm my limbs up and take a seat in one of the chairs. Alexi comes to sit in the other, and I can’t help but feel like an eighty-year-old couple sitting by the fire.

“Are you going to stop hovering now?” I ask him gently, needing to know if this was all supposed to be a distraction or if he actually heard me.

“I don’t know,” he says quietly, like he knows what he’s doing is wrong but can’t help himself.

I get up, not wanting our disagreement to separate us. Our back and forth is too much right now. We’ve chosen each other, so it’s about time we made good on that. Before I even make it over to him, his legs part and he reaches out, pulling me down to his lap and cradling me. It’s soft and sweet and nothing like the man I thought I knew. Alexi may be as hard as iron on the outside, but on the inside, he’s just a little boy who wants to be loved.

“What is it you’re afraid of?” I ask. He’s quiet for a moment. It’s a deep ask, but if he’s going to keep hovering, I at least need to be able to understand why.

“I’m afraid of losing you. Every time...” he trails off, his voice cracking ever so slightly. I stay still in his arms, waiting to see if he wants to go further with that explanation or not. Eventually, he lets out a breath and continues. “Every time I care about something, it’s either hurt, taken away, or killed.”

I look up at him and wrap my arms around his neck, bringing us eye to eye. I get it now, but he needs to understand where I’m coming from too.

“I’m not hurt easily. No one is going to take me away because I won’t let them. And if I die, I need you to know and understand it was on my terms. I was doing something I thought was right. Not just sitting here in a cage.”

He nods carefully then looks away.

“Why don’t you ever sleep with us?” I ask him, having stayed up countless times thinking about what he was doing in his insanely large room, in his giant ass bed, alone.

“I can get really possessive when I sleep, and you haven’t read my list yet. You not only don’t know what I’m into, but it also might scare you. I don’t think I could handle you looking truly afraid of me again.”

Well holy shit, the man just opened up to me. Like, really opened up and gave me a vulnerable piece of himself and trusted me with it.

“Then send me your list and I’ll send you mine. I’m not afraid of you, Batman. I’m afraid of what you can do to me. I’ve never needed anyone before, and now I find myself not only needing one, but three men. While that may be a little scary, it doesn’t mean I’m afraid of you going too far because I truly trust all of you with that. I’m just afraid you’ll leave once you see how much of a mess I really am, when all of my demons rise to the surface.”

“Let them rise, Princess. My demons have always been good at dancing with you. Maybe they will enjoy your demons

as well.”

Alexi’s fingers thread through my hair, then tighten to pull me in for a kiss. A searing moment that I can feel all the way to my core. I straddle his lap, and his hands rest on my hips before moving under the back of my shirt to rubbing lazy circles, exploring my skin like he wants to memorize it.

When I pull back, we’re breathless but neither of us wants this to go any further. I for one am happy to rearrange myself in his arms and contentedly nap the afternoon away by the fire with my dark knight. He pulls up his list for me and I read through it while his fingers comb through my hair.

I feel like we have worked through something and finally come to an understanding. I would love, live, and even run away with these boys, but my choices and my freedom will always be my own.



Chapter 18

I've been doing everything I can to give Evie her space. It's been a distraction to not be aware of exactly where she is. I find myself looking through the house's security footage and following her movements more often than I'd care to admit. But at least she doesn't feel followed or watched after this way. I just need to know she's safe.

After I wrap up a meeting with my father where we worked with the information Lev gave us about the hard-drives, we both decide to go talk to Evie and update her on a few places we could go from here.

I check the video footage to make sure she's in her room. She went to the gym this morning for a light workout now that she's been cleared, and I obsessively watched her and made

sure the doctor was on call just in case something happened. That, to me, was being reasonable.

I would have preferred to observe the session in person while having a doctor present and her wearing a monitor, just to make sure she didn't take things too far. But I'm trying to give her space and I feel like she would have taken that poorly.

"I'll meet you by her door," I say to my father as we exit the in-home office of his in the west wing of the house.

Our rooms are on the other side, and I know my girl will be starving for some serious protein. So, I want to surprise her with breakfast. I could ask a chef to make it and bring it to her, but there's something about cooking for my girl that eases the tension in my mind.

I've been tense ever since she notified me she was working out this morning and banned Damien and Lev from coming with her.

The guys are still in Damien's bed, where they all slept last night. Evie hasn't been having night terrors while we're here. She seems to always find herself sandwiched between the two of them or on top of one of them while the other is tucked into their side. I check on them every night. Watching them sleep isn't really a sexual thing for me, but more of a calming thing to be able to see the people I care about most are safe and content.

I was surprised the other night when Evie wasn't put off by anything on my list as she read through it. Not many women are into the submissive daddy's girl kink, and even fewer can appreciate primal hunting with aggressive fighting. Except, now that I think about her taking me down the way she had, I shouldn't be surprised that she just might be into the same things. Or at least I hoped she was.

She asked a lot of good questions and I was able to help her through a lot of them, but I also recommended an app that helped me learn a lot. It has videos and explanations that dive deeper into some kinks and helps you understand them on a different level than the average person.

I get to the kitchen and decide to make scrambled eggs and bacon as well as an omelet with veggies for myself and toss it all on a tray. We each have espresso makers in our kitchenettes, so I plan to make coffee once I deliver breakfast. I grab a new container of creamer from the fridge because I know for a fact our girl's addiction blew through her stash in under a week.

When I turn down our hall on the east wing, I can see Evie's door open. At first, I assume she let my father in, which is odd. But then a gunshot rings out, and I swear my whole world flips on its axis.

By the time I reach her door, Lev and Damien are out in the hall wearing only their boxers. They run in just behind me. My chest constricts when I find my father with a freshly fired gun in his hand. My ears are ringing and red coats my vision as I march up to him, refusing to believe he let me bring her here just to kill her himself.

This is exactly what she was afraid of this entire time and it's my fault; it's all my fault.

"Alexi!" I hear Damien yell.

That's when things start coming into focus around me as I grip my father's suit by the front and shove him across the room, before drawing my gun in his face.

He doesn't flinch.

But a new noise pulls my focus. When I look back at Damien and see the blood, I can't bear to keep my eyes moving. I'm thankful as fuck I do because it's then that I see some random guy on the ground by Evie's bathroom door screaming and clutching his leg.

I lower my gun as I take in the scene with unclouded eyes. Lev is holding a towel wrapped around Evie while she holds a blade in her hand, her hair dripping. I get the feeling she was under the spray when she heard the shot go off. Damien is holding a fairly large guy down that also happens to be bleeding from a rather large hole in his leg.

“What the fuck happened here?” I ask, my voice sharper than the knife Evie is now holding over the man screaming.

Her towel is hardly covering her, and I find myself getting even more irate about the fact that the man can look straight up and see what’s mine. Havoc walks in next, absorbing everything and then looking at Evie. She gives him a nod and apparently that’s all he needs to get on the ground and start helping Damien tie the guy up.

Where the fuck did they get rope? Damien.

I walk over to Evie as I put my gun back in its holster.

“Go put some clothes on, Princess,” I say gently in her ear. If I demand anything right now I know she will just turn her blade and that furious expression on me. So I try being nice even though I’m a split second from shooting the fucker in the head for daring to look at my girl. Then, throwing her over my shoulder and locking her in my room forever.

She still glares daggers at me, then seems to realize she’s wrapped in a small towel in front of my father and Havoc. She rushes to her closet, slamming the door behind her. Lev watches the door closely as Damien keeps the still screaming fucker pinned to the ground.

“Get him to the basement,” I order, and my father makes a call. Men arrive to help Damien and Havoc drag him to our in home torture chamber beneath the garage. “Lev, bring her when she’s ready.”

He gives me a nod, and I gesture for my father to follow me into the hall. We make it around the corner before he shoves me against the wall.

“I fucking meant it when I said I would protect her, that I wanted a relationship with you,” he sneers in my face.

“Then the first thing you think when you walk in there is that I hurt your girl? I know we don’t have much trust between us, but so help me son, if you ever again think for a single moment that I wouldn’t put my fucking life on the line to protect her, then you haven’t been listening to a damned thing I’m saying. And maybe there’s just no hope for us.”

I stare him down as he breathes heavily in my face. If he were anyone else in the world I'd just shoot them, but I owe him a debt for saving Evie, so I decide to play nice.

Like the fucking saint I apparently am today.

“Thank you,” I say. It was supposed to come out as sincere, but it sounded more pissed off so I try again because I really do mean it. “Thank you for protecting her. Care to tell me what happened?”

I get why he's angry even as he steps back and runs a hand through his hair like he's just trying to keep it together. He lets out a breath and gains his composure.

“I was going to meet you here and when I turned the corner, I saw that guy picking her lock and going into her room. It didn't click in my mind what was happening at first, but I ran as soon as I realized he wasn't one of the three of you. For a second, I assumed maybe she was hooking up with staff too because apparently having more than one man in her bed is the norm...”

I throw a punch to his gut, not just for him thinking that idiotic thought, but because he also voiced it out loud. He turns to hit me back, but I shove him. This isn't a pissing match. I'm setting a standard, and that is not how my girl will be spoken about. She may be with the three of us, but if any other man were to try to touch her I'd remove their fingers before letting them bleed out at her feet.

“I suggest you try again, or at the very least do not share your idiotic thoughts out loud,” I say, straightening my suit jacket and readjusting the collar. My father huffs at me but continues.

“Anyway, I moved behind him and when I saw him attempting to go into her bathroom, without announcing himself, I knew he wasn't invited. I shot him in the leg where he knelt and moved around so that Evie wouldn't hit me with a blade in case she thought I was the intruder. It helped that the guy fell into the bathroom door and was lying on the ground screaming, but I also didn't want to get stabbed. I've been warned about her aim.”

“Who warned you?”

“Havoc. He and I have been talking. When he’s not training Laney in the gym, we are setting up his initiation: working him through meeting the members and learning our routes in town.”

“He’s training Laney?” I ask slightly stunned.

“I assumed you knew. She asked him shortly after you all got here. I gave them free rein of the gym in the pool house to train. She wanted to learn to defend herself and her friend with more than just a bow, apparently.”

I take a moment to absorb that. I guess he was one of the only people who could really teach her. She knew the three of us wouldn’t have the time and we likely would have said no either way. I’m sure she didn’t ask Evie out of fear of pissing her off because she was still on bed rest. It was a good move, and I admire Laney for wanting to get stronger.

“I need to know if you believe me. We can’t build a relationship on distrust. I’ve always been honest with you even when it wasn’t good— even when I likely should have kept it to myself.”

Taking a moment to truly look at him, I can see the honesty in his eyes. I don’t trust Evie with many people. It’s doubtful I ever will, but I think I’m beginning to trust her ability to handle herself. Because I saw that blade embedded in the wall right by where the trespasser fell into the door. The other was stuck in the bedpost next to where my father had been standing. She likes to play and give warning shots; the two other blades she still had with her in the fucking shower prove that she’s able to defend herself properly again.

My father had many opportunities to hurt all of us but he chose not to, so I guess I can logically come to the conclusion that he is trustworthy. But not without a warning.

“I believe you, but you need to know that if anything happens to her, because of you for any reason, I won’t hesitate to shoot you next time.”

He claps my shoulder and squeezes it affirmingly.

“Son, I will protect her with my life, but I don’t want you all to run. I want to find a way you can all stay.”

I want that too. Lev, Damien, and I have worked for our entire lives to find all the ways we could make this organization better. We have so many plans and ideas, ways we want to help those loyal to us as well as our community. I hate to give it up, but I will for her. I squeeze my father’s shoulder back because I don’t have words to give him. I don’t want to leave, but for Evie’s sake, we might have to.



Chapter 19

After getting dressed, I walk out of the closet all sorts of pissed off. First, some asshole broke into my room while I was showering. Then Boris, of all people, shoots the fucker. Let's not forget to top it all off with my men all coming in here to take the asshole away while I stood there in a towel like I'm completely helpless.

I could have dragged the motherfucker to the basement by myself. Well, with a lot of directions that is. And shit, I guess I shouldn't be doing something like that in just a towel.

But the point is, I could have handled it. Instead of having three protective men surrounding me, apparently I now have a fourth. While part of me is glad to know Boris would defend me, I also hate that he had to.

“Lucky Charm,” Lev says, following me to the bed as I pull on some socks angrily. “Talk to me.”

I huff out a frustrated breath when I pull the sock too tight and rip a large hole in it. Yanking it off, I toss it across the room and turn to glare at the man in front of me.

“I can take care of myself,” I say simply, like he should be able to read my mind right now.

His brows pinch in confusion before he turns around and walks into my closet, coming back with a new pair of socks. I just said I could take care of myself and he thinks doing something for me is the answer right now.

He stands in front of me but makes no motion to give me the socks. Now it’s my turn to be confused. I drop my head into my hands, trying to pull myself together. I’m more mad about the fact that, for a little bit, I let myself believe I was safe. And now I’m terrified my uncle found out I’m here and sent someone after me. I thought we had him fooled, but clearly I’m wrong about that.

“I’m sorry,” I say under my breath, relenting to the fact that I’m being a bratty princess just like Alexi used to think I was. I don’t move my head up to look at him, but I can see between my fingers as he crouches down in front of me and holds out the socks. I reach out and take them with a dramatic sigh, but Lev pulls them back.

“Hey,” I joke, reaching for them again. He stands up to get out of my reach. I move to stand up too, but he shakes his head. “What the fuck, Lev?”

“You seem to interpret us protecting you as if we were saying you’re not capable.” He takes a step towards me, and I sit back down. Lev lowers himself in front of me and puts one of my heels on his knee.

“I know you’re capable of putting on these socks, even though you just ripped a hole in one because you were frustrated.” He cradles my foot and slides a sock onto it, then kisses the top before moving to the next one.

The only reason he's getting away with this sappy shit is because he's him. My mind hasn't caught up with the thought that I should pull away and just take the socks from him.

"But, sometimes," he continues, "we do things for each other to show we care." He kisses the other foot then puts it down and moves between my legs. He's so tall we're eye to eye as he keeps speaking.

"So, Lucky Charm," he breathes over my lips, "get the fuck over it."

Maybe it's because Lev never talks to me this way. Or maybe I'm just melting and becoming this giant softie I never thought I would be. But when Lev leans in to kiss me, even after speaking to me that way, I let him.

Fuck, these boys. I have a badass assassin reputation to protect! That reputation dies on my lips as he pushes me back and keeps kissing me like he's drowning and I'm the only air in his lungs. A moan slips from my lips as he sits up slowly, getting to his feet.

"You good?" he asks.

My face is bright red, my shorts likely have a damp spot, and I want to jump this man right now instead of torturing the fucker that broke into my room. But yeah, I'm great.

"Peachy," I tell him, standing up and flicking my hair over my shoulder so he can read the back of my shirt.

It says 'Don't tell me to smile'. I think that perfectly describes the sarcastic, bitchy mood I'm in at the moment. Lev follows me out the door laughing as I throw on my shoes and look back to him for directions. He takes my hand in his, causing my face to grow even hotter.

How the fuck does he do this to me?

I slowly let the anger and frustration that was building go as I follow Lev to his room to grab clothes for him and Damien. I was so happy to wake up and go to the gym this morning, only to find I had some serious catching up to do. I swear I was radiating lava with how livid I was during my shower; I'm

shocked the bastard that tried to sneak up on me didn't die solely from the rage flowing off of me in waves.

I haven't lost that much progress in the gym since I was taken to that damn prison camp. The more I thought about it, the more I was reminded of all the ways my uncle lied to my face after he rescued me. All those glances of worry were more about if he broke his little toy and less about if I was actually okay. The steam in the shower only fueled my anger.

So, while I know these men were only trying to protect me, the whole situation made me feel vulnerable all over again.

Lev pulls on his pants and gives me a smirk before tossing his shirt on. My eyes rake over his body. He seems to be the perfect distraction from that sour feeling though because the only thought left in my mind right now is how much I want to strip him out of those clothes.

"Later, Lucky Charm, I promise." He punctuates his promise with a tap on my ass. I gasp in surprise.

"So where is this basement?" I ask as we walk out of the room and towards the center of the house.

"It's under the garage. It hasn't been used in a while, Boris rarely brings work home with him. But every once in a while, we have an enemy that deserves to suffer a little longer, and he's always loved taking his time with a few of them. It's one of the reasons he's so feared. Men all over Russia, throughout the world even, have heard about what he does to traitors."

I gulp slightly, thinking that if these men hadn't protected me I could have easily ended up in that basement if I had gone after Boris. Fuck my uncle.

It takes a while of walking and turning down different corridors before we finally make it to the infamous basement. Two guards stand at the stairwell entrance. They hesitate to open the door when they catch sight of me, but Alexi comes through the doors and instead of holding them open for us, he turns to his men.

"I will give the two of you one warning. This," he points at me, "is my girl. She can go wherever she wants, do whatever

she wants, and you will do nothing to stop her. You will protect her with your life should she find herself in danger. And finally, if I see you looking at her for even a second too long, I'll make what we're about to do to this asshole down there look like a tropical beach vacation. Got it?"

My eyes widen at his words, the freedom and protection he just granted me. I had thought he was overbearing, but the way he's speaking truly makes me believe he heard me when I said I needed to feel free. He didn't order them to follow me or stick to my side. He told them I had free rein and could do whatever the fuck I wanted while they had to step between me and a bullet. It's an odd form of chivalry, but damn it makes my heart melt for this man.

I let go of Lev's hand to take Alexi's instead. He turns to me with a surprised expression. Standing on my tiptoes, I kiss his cheek, making his face turn red. I almost giggle at the sight and nearly forget we have to torture a man for information.

"Ready, Batman?" I ask, tugging him through the door. He nods then squeezes my hand twice before letting go. Lev follows.

The smell of iron and damp concrete reach my nose before I even see him. The guy is strapped to a chair and secured with chains. Blood pools from the gunshot wound. He looks too pale. Without asking, I walk over to the tool bench and grab a leather strap and screwdriver.

I didn't think the man could get any whiter, but when his eyes land on me as I approach him, he goes so pale I could swear he was dead. Well damn, he must know who I am. That's kind of anticlimactic.

Wrapping the strap around his leg, I use the screwdriver as leverage to make a tourniquet. He doesn't get to bleed out before I get my answers. I definitely twisted it too tight, but we both know he isn't going to need his legs again, so there's no point in being gentle or checking for a pulse. I just need him to not bleed out until I'm finished with him.

Once secure, I grab a blade I strapped to my thigh and turn on him. I could see all the men in the room watching me, and

that's when a few more things became clear. Damien obviously slapped the guy around a few times, and I know Havoc was responsible for the cuts under the man's ears. He has a special kind of fucked up torture method. It starts with making men slowly lose their hearing so they think they are dying way faster than they really are. It's effective because we get answers much quicker that way, and he's still able to play for a while longer afterwards.

I turn to address the room first, making it very clear who's in charge here. This might not be my house, but I'll gladly drag the man off the property to make sure his death is at my hands.

"He is mine," I point, and the man actually fucking whimpers. "Any of you touch him, and I won't hesitate to cut you too. Now sit back and watch why I'm one of the best at what I do, got it?"

Boris' jaw ticks in the same way Alexi's does when I give him orders, but he nods along with the rest of them. Havoc's arms are crossed over his chest, his foot kicked back against the wall as he stands by Laney. He's ready for the show he knows I'm about to give. I move to turn toward the victim when Lev stops me with a hand on my arm.

"What?" I ask.

"Don't want this to get all bloody," he says as he takes the tie from my wrist and pulls my hair up into a ponytail. He kisses me on the cheek, and I feel a blush rising to them. I have to close my eyes to clear my head for a moment as he backs away. When I open them, I'm ready.

"Why are you here?" I ask lazily, cocking a hip out like I'm bored. I swear I hear Damien snicker. He comes up next to me.

"We found this on him," he informs me, holding out a syringe filled with a cloudy serum.

"Care to explain?"

The man's eyes flash with defiance before looking me up and down. I see Alexi move in my peripheral, clearly not

liking the assessment of me, but Lev pulls him back and I smile internally.

“You know who I am, don’t you?” I ask, getting closer with my blade casually hanging from my hand. The sharp, cool steel against my palm feels almost like an extension of me. Deadly when wielded.

“The way you looked at me when I was done tying up that leg of yours. You know who I am. I want you to tell me how. Now.”

“I’m not telling you shit, little girl,” he spits at my feet, and I pounce like a dog receiving a new squeaky toy. My fist jolts his face to the side and a sickening crunch echoes through the room.

I thought he might break easily, but I’m glad he’s not. I miss the caress of blood as it drips down my blade and over my fingertips.

I don’t say anything in response. He made the choice to disrespect me. He can deal with the consequences. I glide my blade gently down his exposed chest, just enough to burn but not open skin. His breath comes in pants as he watches me and when our eyes connect again, I press harder and carve a large X across his chest. He grits through the pain, and my excitement must be palpable because Damien starts cheering me on.

“Hell yeah, Little Shadow, that’s hot as fuck.”

I grin and get back to work, marking him until he’s screaming. I don’t stop when he starts giving me information. He tells me he was sent by a man he didn’t know the name of to see what was happening during the break. When he reported back there was a girl with them, the man asked him to get a picture. For some reason, the asshole thought it’d be a good idea to snap one of me in the shower. Now that I’ve got the information I needed, I’m ready to play.

My blade has the time of its life slicing him up until he can no longer give me anything. He even confesses to me that he raped a woman when he was twenty and left her lifeless body

in the street when he was done with her. He tells me he has a kid he's never once visited because he didn't want to be tied down. Every confession a man could make on death's door about his poor life choices flows out of him like a river of regret. He even tells me he once stole a candy bar when he was a child, just out of hope and desperation that I might stop my assault on his skin.

Carving off chunks of flesh next, I cut deeper and deeper until he's flayed open for me. He's passed out more than a few times from the pain. When Havoc tries to wake him for me a fifth time, I can see in his eyes he won't make it through another round. I pick up another blade, discarding my dirty one. I want to make sure I'm the last thing he sees before his eyes close for eternity.

"Was it worth it?" I ask. "Going up against the Bratva? Taking orders from men who hide behind computers and phones asking others to do their dirty work for them. Was it worth it?"

He shakes his head slightly, unable to speak since I cut out his tongue, then gagged him because his screams started making my ears ring. And now that I have no more need for him and have satisfied my bloodlust, I slice his neck wide open. All the warm blood coats my fingers, painting me as the assassin I really am.

Once I've taken in my fill of the masterpiece I created, I turn to look at the men in the room. Boris' face is one of utter shock, likely over my extreme methods. Damien is grinning and Lev looks worried for me. Havoc is unbothered as he begins cleaning the mess. Alexi is unreadable as usual.

Laney though, I'm actually worried about her. Havoc goes to her before I can, and they immediately leave with his hand on her back. I grab a towel from the bench and reluctantly wipe my hands until only a light coat of red stains them; then I toss it back on the bench.

"Since he never got the picture to the man in question, I assume I'm still safe here. I know you've been working hard

on getting a secondary location ready for us, but I think I have a better idea.”

I had been thinking while I worked, trying to figure out what we were going to do next. Once I knew we still had some time, I felt some pieces click into place. But I also think these men might refuse what I have planned. Then I remember that Alexi owes me a favor. If I cash that in, they won't be able to say no.

“I want my favor,” I say, looking Alexi in the eye. I'm sure he already suspects what I'm going to say, but I don't think they've all figured it out yet.

“In order to graduate we have to come up with an idea to complete the trials. I want the three of you on my team, along with Laney and Nessa. I want to take down my uncle. I want revenge for everything he's done to me, and I want us *all* safe. I'm not running. I'm Evie fucking James, and Adrik is about to realize that he messed with the wrong girl.”

One side of Alexi's mouth lifts in a smirk while Damien comes to scoop me in his arms, kissing me like a savage and licking blood from my face. I already know Lev agreed to anything when he confessed his love for me, but knowing they will all have my back on this...it makes hope swell in my chest more than it has in a long fucking time.

“No,” a stern voice says, snapping me out of my hope filled daze. We all turn to look at Boris. He looks annoyed.

“You don't get to come in here and put all of them in danger. I just got you back. I just got them back, and you're not going to throw yourselves to the wolves on some half assed plan for revenge.”

Damien sets me down, and I walk up to Boris, getting in his face and ready to show him just who I am.

“But,” he says, smirking at me before I can get a word in. “I'll let you do this if you let me help you. I'm sure you know by now Arrow is part of our organization and he will help you plan. Havoc will help too since he knows Adrik's tactics better than the rest of us. If you want to go in, it won't just be about

the trials. It will be about claiming everything you have here. It will be about making something for yourselves. So, what do you say, Evie fucking James?”

I tilt my head to the side at his acknowledgement of my new name. It feels strange for him not to call me Eydis, but it also feels like an acceptance. It reminds me that he really is looking out for me just like my father had asked him to. I look into the eyes of the man who I thought wanted me dead, and I can truly see his care for me on every inch of his face for the first time.

He’s not doing this to take control, he’s doing this to help set us up to be as great as we can be. To help us all forge a way in this world that isn’t ruled or destined by our past.

The room feels like it’s holding its breath as the two of us face off. I let them all sweat it out. This moment is big, and as I hear the thunder crash outside above us, it’s as if the universe feels the shift within itself.

I reach out my hand for Boris and the moment we shake, another clap of thunder roars in the distance. A smile spreads across my face. It seems the universe agrees that my big bad uncle needs to go down.



Chapter 20

I help Laney to the bathroom, knowing she's going to vomit the second her knees hit the ground. Sure enough, she falls and empties the contents of her stomach. She starts shaking, her body clearly in shock from everything she's seen. After spending all of this time together, it's clear her father has shielded her from the bloody side of the business.

I get on the floor next to her and pull her into my lap. I don't know why, but I can't resist comforting her. I've never done this with anyone, not even E. When she was adjusting after her time in the prison camp, I'd sit in her room with her. But I never had this nearly painful itch to want to touch her like I do with Laney.

"I'm sorry," she says as tears track down her face. "I just... wow that was too far for me."

I tuck her hair behind her ear and wipe a tear away with my thumb. It's gentle and kind, everything I'm not. They don't call me Havoc for shits and giggles.

"There's no need to be sorry. This is normal for the first few times you see someone tortured."

I try to run my fingers through her hair again but she flinches back.

"The first few times?" She shakes her head, pushing herself up to stand as she flushes the toilet. "That will not be happening again. The only reason I was there in the first place was for Evie. Now, I see she's fully capable of handling the violence on her own. I find no reason to sit through that again."

She angrily yanks the door open, stalking out to the hall while ignoring me completely. I grin maniacally behind her. *Her attitude is fun.*

It's hilarious to watch her mess up with something in training and see her snarky side come to life. It happened a lot more often when she could hear her phone dinging constantly with messages from her boy toy.

Does he even really work? Because it seems like all he ever does is text her.

She storms into her room, and I follow without invitation. After all, I am a villain. We don't have to ask for what we want, we take it.

I try to reach out for her, but the blood coating my hands makes her eyes go wide. I hadn't even noticed it was still on me. She backs away, her face turning green, then runs to her bathroom to vomit again.

I quickly rinse off my hands in the sink and sit beside her to hold back her hair. Who the fuck am I right now?

She scowls down at my pants that are stained with blood, my shirt covered as well. "Take it off or get away from me. I don't want to see blood again for at least a week."

I laugh at her request, and she squeezes her eyes shut as tight as she can. As if the crimson stains would fade if she only wished it hard enough. I tilt her chin up to look me in the eyes.

“Baby girl, our lives are stained with the blood of those who stand between us and the ones we love. It’s not all unicorns and rainbows out there, and you can’t expect it to be.”

Her brows pinch slightly, as if the mere idea of the world not being peaceful and full of happiness was blasphemy.

“What’s so wrong with liking unicorns and rainbows? Just because I don’t bathe in the blood of my enemies doesn’t mean my skills are less than. They’re just different.” She closes her eyes, but when she opens them again, it’s with a look full of new resolve. She stands up tall, straightening her spine, and moves to the sink to rinse out her mouth.

“Do you know why I chose a bow as my weapon?” she asks me as I follow her back to her room.

“Because it looked cool?” It’s sarcastic but at least it gets her to smile a bit.

“I learned to be good with a bow so that my enemies stay at a distance. I prefer to use my words and my body to manipulate people and play the game that I was born into. It doesn’t mean I haven’t killed men, it just means I don’t relish in it. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

I think about that. She’s not wrong. She has skills that not even I can master. Her words are sharp and careful. She stands and walks to the door gesturing for me to leave, but just before I cross the threshold she gets so close our lips are only an inch apart.

“Havoc?” she breathes.

“Yes?”

“You got blood on my floor.” Her hands ghost over my abs, hovering just a hair away from the blood coating my clothes. “I told you to get your clothes off or get out.”

She pops the button on the top of my jeans, my dick swiftly growing painfully hard just behind the zipper.

“Maybe next time, you’ll listen.” She takes a step back, then slams the door in my face.

I clearly need to re-evaluate who the women of the underworld really are. They don’t all have to be like E. She craves the color red—I think my little unicorn might prefer pink.



The next day I’m running jobs with the others, collecting money and learning some of the routes around town. We take a break to stretch our legs, and I end up walking past a children’s store. A little girl catches my eye, her blonde hair pulled into adorable pigtails, reminding me so much of my little Elise.

She trots into the store and points at a stuffed snowman that seems oddly misshapen with a carrot nose too big for his face. She squeals as her mother buys it for her, and a rare genuine smile touches my lips.

I enter the store, looking at the snowman with the name “Olaf” written across it. The Norse name is interesting for a child’s toy, but then I see the item sitting next to it.

The words Laney spoke to me yesterday have weighed heavily on my heart. I desperately want to find a middle ground with her. I feel like I scared her and now that she sees who Evie really is, I don’t want her to be afraid of us. If she wants to stay away from that side of what we do, I don’t see anything wrong with that.

I grab the plush next to the relic snowman and pay for it. The guys eye me when I get back to the truck, but I ignore them. They will eventually be working for me and if they say anything now, I sure as hell plan to bring it up later.

We get back to the estate right when my phone dings with a message just as I walk in the doors.

Unicorn: Lev is setting up a movie with popcorn. Want to come with me?

I grin and head straight to her room without responding. I have the bag in hand but stop to grab a pen from the open study and put a note on the tag just for her. I want her to know I heard her and respect her choice.



Chapter 21

We need something exciting. Evie has this permanent line of worry and frustration on her face I'm afraid I'll never see melt away. She sleeps with Damien and me, but nothing has happened between any of us since that man broke into her room, and it's been three days. Alexi is stressed trying to come up with a plan his father will approve of and with Christmas coming up, I can't bear for this to go on any longer. So, I've enlisted Damien to help me come up with ideas, but that's been chaos from the start.

“What if we surprised her with an orgy?” He waggles his brows. “I could get us all stockings to cover our cocks, and we could take turns making her come while she calls us Santa.”

He bounces in his seat with excitement as I look at him over my computer with a smile mixed with irritation. While he can

be hilarious, he's also fucking insane.

“Orgasms aren't a present, D. She gets those for free. I want to do something fun to help her get out of her head for longer than thirty minutes.”

“Then we make it last longer than thirty minutes,” he says, shrugging his shoulders like it's the most simple explanation in the world.

“D, come on, please take this seriously.” I click on the app that opens up Evie's phone history. I don't usually invade her privacy, but since it's in the interest of trying to figure out a gift for her for Christmas, I convince myself it's okay. I'd like to think I'm not as possessive as Alexi, but it's more likely I'm just much better at hiding it.

I scroll through her history and ignore her messages, feeling like that crosses a line. I look through the apps she's used most frequently, hoping to find something on Amazon. I'm surprised to see she downloaded a kink app and has just finished a list of her limits and interests as well as many other sorts of lists the app suggests. She's even watched videos and read in-depth about things I know are on Alexi's list. Sure enough, I see he sent her his and suggested the app.

I won't read her list until she sends it to me, but I pull out my phone and shoot her the file of mine that I recently sent Damien.

“Hey, have you sent her your list yet?”

Damien pulls out his phone frantically. “Fuck, is that why she's been passing out cold and not fucking us?”

I see when his message pops up on her phone. A few minutes later, she pulls up hers but pauses. She could be busy talking or something, but I have a feeling she's sitting there debating on sending it to us.

Maybe she's into some kinky shit she's afraid to send? I shoot her a text, hoping it doesn't give away that I'm snooping right now. I'll tell her about it later and swear to never use it again after Christmas. I just want to know what she wants.

Lev: You could be against all of this and you'd still be mine. These lists don't change anything.

She doesn't respond for a minute, then I watch as our brave girl pulls up the documents and hits send.

Such a good girl.

“So, are you rethinking the orgy idea?” Damien asks as I continue to click around. I see she's downloaded this app called Pinterest and has been scrolling through tattoo ideas. My lips curve up at that. She's also saved a bunch of very sassy, very sarcastic shirts she must like the idea of.

And just like that, an idea comes to mind.

“Maybe after, but for now I think I have something in mind. Come on.”

He gets up and follows me, a huge grin on my face thinking of what my Lucky Charm will say when she sees what I've got planned.



Alexi was tasked with distracting Evie. He assured me that he'll keep her busy while D and I set everything up. We string fairy lights all around the theater by the pool house and get all the snacks together since we know our girl loves to eat. The popcorn machine has just finished filling up, making the room smell like an actual movie theater. I set out a few drinks for everyone, but my anxiety is high because I don't want D to feel tempted or left out. I also don't want to baby him.

He glances at the bottles as I set them up but makes no comment or move towards them. All of my muscles are stiff as I start setting up pillows and fuzzy blankets on the large couches that could be mistaken for beds. Unable to make eye contact with him or look up to see if he's considering a drink I force myself to keep my hands busy.

“You don't have to worry, Lev,” Damien says, crowding me from behind. “It doesn't tempt me anymore. I know that I'm better than my father. I don't need to drown anything out because I have everything I could ever need right here.”

His arm wraps around my front while the heat of his breath grazes my neck.

“I don’t want it to not tempt you only when things are good though.” The confession hurts to get out. Ever since I watched the light fade from his eyes, when we left that suite with Evie behind us, I’m afraid that the next time shit goes down he’s going to lose it again.

“I’m working on it. I’m learning who I can trust and lean on. I won’t promise you things I can’t keep, so instead I’ll promise that the next time I feel that way, I’ll talk about it first.”

He keeps my back firmly pressed to his front. I’m honestly surprised his words are enough for me to relax into him. It’s obvious addiction isn’t cured over night, and it sure as fuck isn’t cured through threats and bargaining. It’s something he will likely live with for the rest of his life. While I never want the sickness to claim him again, I also soak in his words for what they are. He’s trying and he’s aware. He wants to be better for himself, not just us.

Which is why I turn in his grip, keeping our bodies pressed together, and kiss him with all of the emotions I don’t know how to voice. I kiss him with all the love I have for him, the lust. I kiss him with the fierceness of the sun so he knows I’ll always be in his corner. I kiss him with the promise of tomorrow and the joy of the sight of waking up to him every morning.

We break apart and rest our foreheads to each other; I breathe the words that I’ve been wanting to get out since the plane landed here.

“When you asked Evie to marry you, and I told her to marry us, you know I meant that I want to marry you too, right?”

He grins at me in that special way of his and I smile back, loving the joy and light I see in his eyes.

“Is this you asking, big boy? Where’s my ring?” He pulls me close, my hand sliding around his neck before I fist his hair.

“I’m not asking, I’m telling you. You’re mine, just as much as Evie is ours,” I growl, keeping my voice light but serious.

“I’m yours,” he agrees, “and you’re both mine. I still expect a ring though.” He kisses me, and I laugh into it.

“I’ll get you one as soon as we get Evie one,” I promise.

He pulls back with a glint of worry in his eyes. I know exactly what he’s thinking.

Alexi.

“How the fuck do we tell him?” I’m hoping Damien will come up with a crazy, off the wall plan just to distract me from the wrath of Alexi.

“We will talk to him soon.” Damien surprises me with the seriousness in his tone. “He might be angry that we asked her first, but there’s no doubt in my mind he wants this. If anything, the only reason either of them might be against it at this point is because they are stubborn as hell and would go out of their way to *not* do something someone planned for them.”

I snort at that because it’s so true. We’re going to have a lifetime of them butting heads, and I look forward to every single second of it.

A knock sounds at the door. Opening it I find Laney dressed in bright neon pink pajamas, holding a stuffed unicorn. I could laugh at this girl sometimes with how much she doesn’t embody the badass manipulator she really is.

“I was promised movies and popcorn,” she says giddily.

“Come on in,” I gesture as she takes it all in.

I startle when Havoc walks in behind her, not even noticing him in her shadow of pink. He’s in a black shirt and sweatpants but sticking oddly close to my girl’s best friend. Laney doesn’t seem to notice him or the looks he shoots her as she seasons a bucket full of popcorn with way too much butter. She fixes herself a drink and before she can bring it back to the second couch bed, Havoc reaches around her and takes it for her.

She rolls her eyes, but doesn't say anything as she bounces over to the cozy setup and gets comfortable with her snacks. Havoc sits on her other side and waits until she's under a blanket before he moves close, but not too close. Damien and I exchange a glance while I shoot Alexi a text telling him to bring Evie before things get too weird.

"So, what are we watching?" Laney asks, digging into her popcorn.

"We were gonna let Evie decide," Damien responds. She nods her head.

"You know, for some badass mafia men, the three of you can be pretty fucking romantic."

I snort and Damien grins. "I guess we do alright from time to time," I say as a knock sounds at the door again. A second later Evie is walking in with Alexi, and the smile I've been dying to see lights up her face as she runs to me. I pick her up in my arms, her legs wrap around my waist as she kisses me.

"This looks so amazing," Evie says, taking everything in before running over to hug her friend and Havoc.

Damien scoops her in his arms and tosses her on the bed, asking what snacks he can bring her while Alexi stands in the back of the room, looking like he has no idea what to do.

"Get comfortable, bro," I tell him gently, hoping it makes him feel better.

"How did you know this is what she needed?" he questions in a low tone.

"I told you," I tell him, grabbing his shoulder and encouraging him forward to grab snacks, "she brings us balance. She needs all of us. She needed to train with you this morning. She's going to need Damien's cuddles and him being overbearing with snacks and jokes. And she needs me to see that this is what her heart needed."

Alexi scrubs a hand down his face like he doesn't understand any of this, I feel bad for the guy. He's so used to doing it all, being it all, and this is clearly frustrating him.

“If you want to learn to do more of this stuff, I can help,” I offer.

He nods at me slowly, his expression lightening. “I feel like I’m always coming up short, just shy of what she needs.”

We are still in the back of the room. No one else can hear us as they all joke about the movie choice while popcorn is thrown at any wrong votes.

“You don’t come up short,” I say, taking his hand in mine. We aren’t typically affectionate with each other, but sometimes physical touch can help center us, so when he lets me hold his hand and squeeze it reassuringly, I keep going.

“I didn’t realize she was struggling in the gym and getting frustrated with it, but you did. Damien didn’t notice she was going back into her room in the middle of the night to cry, but you did. And you figured out what she needed to claim parts of herself back. You don’t come up short, we all just work differently. You don’t have to figure it all out for her because the three of us will work together to do that.”

I let go of his hand, not wanting to push him.

“I...” he whispers like he’s confessing a secret, “I want to know how to help her with her night terrors. I don’t want to sleep with you guys because I’m afraid I’ll do the wrong thing and hurt her.”

My heart crushes for my brother because I know just how hard not having the answer can hit him.

“I’ll help you. She’s sent us her list, so we will read through the aftercare details to see what she needs to comfort her. But I think you should start staying with us. That way if she does need anything, you can be there too.”

He nods in agreement. “I know she was doing better with the night terrors before that man broke in. How is she doing now?”

“She’s been having them again. I don’t think she realized how much it rattled her. I think even now she’s trying not to face it. She tries to hide them from us if she can.”

His fists clench as he stares at her across the room. He resembles a bear when it comes to protecting her, so I can imagine that he's picturing that guy being tortured and reliving the sight of her taking back control.

I think the only reason she isn't locked in a cage is because we all saw exactly who she was that day, and I'll never think of her as a naive or innocent girl again. I always knew she was a fighter, but I had no idea she knew torture methods that could rival Damien's.

"I'll be there," Alexi says after a minute.

After the first movie, we're all laughing like a giant family. Evie is laying between my legs on her side while Damien is to one side and Alexi on my other. She's got her face buried into my chest as she laughs at Laney attempting to catch popcorn in her mouth while Havoc tosses it.

"I thought you were an expert marksman," Laney taunts as Havoc misses her mouth by a mile. His face is twisted into this frown laugh combination. Evie's chest shakes from the force of her laughter. I can't stop myself from laughing along with the ridiculousness of it all when it's mine and Evie's turn. Alexi is smiling at our game while Damien nearly rolls off the couch in laughter at Laney's taunts.

I smile as I look around, happy that everyone finally seems to have found a little slice of peace in this life, even if it's just for a moment. I think back to when I'd watch movies with my mother, and she'd hold me close so that I wouldn't get scared during the suspenseful parts. I was never scared, but I let her hold me, knowing she was doing her best to protect me and make me feel safe. A pang of longing hits my heart at her memory. It's been so long since I've thought of her and guilt eats at me over it.

Evie seems to notice the shift in my mood as I let the grief consume me. But, like the lucky charm she is, she bats it off of its path to my heart with a kiss. Melting into her, I let her keep it at bay. I know eventually I'll come to terms with what happened, but that day doesn't seem to be anywhere in sight.

So, until then, I'll let the good in and hope it overpowers the grief.

"You okay, Ghost?" Evie breathes, just for us to hear.

I kiss her back. "I'm good. You ready for your next surprise?"

Her soft smile turns into a full grin. I tug her closer. "You mean this isn't it? Because this all feels pretty perfect to me."

Squeezing her one last time, I press a kiss to her forehead before moving her to Damien's arms and going over to get the cup I stashed away before everyone got here. The laughter dies out as Evie watches me. When I return with a red cup in hand, her brows furrow.

"What's in that?" she asks hesitantly.

"I was thinking," I say to everyone, standing up by the large screen, "We need something to look forward to. With Christmas coming up, I thought it would be fun to draw names and do a gift exchange."

Laney squeals and bounces in her seat. "Is there a theme?" I look right at my girl as I answer her friend.

"Sarcastic T-shirts."

"Fuck yes!" Evie says, at the same time Alexi says, "What?" Damien rolls in laughter again.

Laney is smiling while Havoc is watching Evie as she dances in her seat along with her friend, cheering over the idea. A gentle smile tugs at his lips, and I find that I love to watch him watch her find joy. Seeing Evie's face is always priceless, but seeing how she makes this found family feel brings a joy to my heart I wasn't even aware existed.

"Is it a secret or do we get to tell each other?" Evie asks, looking at me with a childlike happiness I've never seen in her before.

"What do you want?"

She sits back and thinks about it, putting a finger to her chin in thought.

“I think we should make it a surprise, then have to guess after we all open them!” She nearly jumps out of her seat with the idea, and I burst out in laughter, loving how much lighter everything feels.

“Whatever you want, Lucky Charm.” When I pass the cup around, Alexi hesitates, seeming not to love the idea until he pulls out a name that makes him change his mind. Damien bounces on the couch with Evie in excitement as they discuss where they want to go shopping.

Laney and Havoc both pick names too, and the face Laney makes when she sees her name makes the girl nearly glow in excitement.

“Do we all have to wear the shirts we receive?” Laney asks. I get the feeling she’s planning something devious so I obviously must play along.

Evie moves over to sit by her friend again as she talks. “Let’s say we have to wear them on our first day back on the island?”

“No,” Alexi interjects. I know clothing matters to him. Certain textures can bother him, and then there’s his whole issue with control. He may have gotten more relaxed and started wearing the casual sweats with tank tops along with Damien and me, but the brands are specific and thread count is important.

Fuck, I should have thought about this more. I’ll have to make sure I find out who has him so they can know what he needs specifically.

“Come on, Batman. You can trade out your dark night costume for one day, right?”

Evie gives him pouty eyes, but Alexi just looks angry. Instead of answering her, he gets up to leave and Evie’s face falls. I walk over to her and press my lips to hers for a moment before whispering, “I’ll go talk to him. Stay and start a new movie, we will be back in a few minutes.”

I hate how it only took a single act for her to look stressed out and bothered again. I know Alexi didn’t do it on purpose,

but I don't like that he acts like this without thinking sometimes.

I walk out to the hall and find him pacing behind the pool house. His hands are fisted in his now longer black hair. I watch him as he struggles with this, trying to think of how to help him. When he lets out a sigh and presses his forehead to the pool house door, I walk out to meet him.

"Hey man," I try to say gently, but it still startles him.

"Why would you do that? You know me. You know I can't handle wearing a lot of things. Much less something I have no control over. Why would you do this?" The panic and pain in his eyes makes me pause.

I've never seen Alexi in a panic like this and I'm honestly not sure what to do. He's finally starting to open up to us more, and I feel like if we don't fix this now, he's going to shut us out again.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking more about something that would make Evie happy. I didn't even consider this could affect you this way. I knew you were particular, but I didn't realize it was quite so important to you. I swear, I didn't do this to hurt you."

"I know you didn't, Lev, it's just..." He hits the brick by the door and recoils with pain. "Fuck. It's like this."

He throws his hands in the air like I'm supposed to know what that means.

"It doesn't make sense. I'm fucked up, Lev. More than even you know. I can't control this part of me. I can't make it go away. I'm a disaster. She's never going to want me when she sees this."

"How about," Evie says, walking around the side of the house, "you let me be the judge of that." Alexi instantly gives Evie his back, as if he could hide from what she's already heard him say.

She puts her hand on his shoulder as she turns him to face her. "Look at me," she commands softly, taking his bleeding hand in hers. "We all have our damage, and I see you, Alexi."

His shoulders soften, and he melts into her touch as she looks over his hand.

“I see all of you; I have since the first day I met you. I know exactly the kind of man you are. I know who you fight for and why you fight. I know your struggles, and I know your pain. I know your loss, and I know your heart.” She places a hand over his chest, and his breathing begins to slow.

“I will never ask you to do something that makes you uncomfortable, and I will never expect you to do something for me that hurts you. So if this is too much, you just have to tell me. I can’t read your mind, Batman. Talk to me.”

He gently takes her hand off his chest and kisses it. The panic in his eyes subsides while he inhales one more breath. He pulls her close, caging her to him. His eyes meet mine, and what I’ve been saying all along passes over his lips.

Balance.

“I want to do this,” Alexi says after a few minutes of silence. “But whoever picked my name just needs to know the kind of shirts I wear and the materials that bother me. Is that okay?”

Evie leans back in his arms, pushing up on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Whatever you need, Batman.”

I don’t want to linger there, so I give them their moment, happy to know we’ve found the missing piece to our puzzle. If she can help Alexi, then she’s even more perfect for us than I thought.

“Everything good?” Damien asks as I sit back down on the couch in the movie room. I nod and pull him close to me, needing to feel his warm body against mine. Laney and Havoc are pressed against each other under a blanket, and the new movie comes on the screen just as Alexi and Evie come back into the room.

Evie grabs another round of snacks for everyone, throwing half the bags of chips at Damien while he pretends to be a receiver catching a touchdown. We all fall back into that state of ease and when the movie ends and Evie is sleeping soundly

in my arms, we decide to stay for a while after Laney and Havoc go to bed.

“I found out Evie’s been looking at tattoos,” I tell the guys as I stroke her hair. Alexi appears to be typing out what looks to be a very stern email before he looks up and pockets his phone, giving this conversation all of his attention. I’ve never seen him do that for a girl before, and I love all the changes I’m seeing in him when it comes to her.

“Do I want to know how?” Alexi asks me, like he knows exactly what led me to that information. I ignore him in lieu of telling them my idea.

“I want to design something just for her as a gift from the three of us. I think those scars on her thigh really bother her, and I want to cover them with something good. Something like a promise. So, will you guys help me come up with something?”

“I’m not good at art,” Alexi begins, “but I do have a few ideas. I’ll send you an email with my thoughts and you can go from there. I’ve seen your skills, and it would be nice to see you getting back into drawing.”

I realize with all the stress of the university and everything with Evie, I haven’t sketched in a long time. In fact, the last thing I think I made was Damiens tattoo.

“I’ll text you my ideas,” Damien says, pulling out his phone.

Alexi stands and scoops Evie into his arms. She stirs just enough to see it’s him, then tucks herself into his chest. Damien and I follow until we all fall into Alexi’s bed together.

We’ve never stayed in here before, but as we all crawl under the sheets with Alexi on one side of Evie and me on the other with Damien, who’s pushing his hard dick into my ass, everything feels right. For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel a sense of home.



Chapter 22

I wake to a familiar sound that splits my heart in two pieces. My eyes open to find Lev holding Evie while she fights him, sweat coating her body and Alexi standing at the side of the bed looking terrified. He turns on the bedside lamp and though I find a sense of comfort in knowing what to do for her here, I also feel so broken for everything she's feeling right now.

I push myself up and take her from Lev's arms just as she begins shaking. Lev grabs a trash can, holding it out for her as she starts panting and screaming. The trembling in her body is so intense I have to keep her pressed to me so she doesn't slip from my grip.

She starts heaving into the trash can. Her eyes look glazed over, as if she's still trapped in the memories of her past. Alexi moves to leave, clearly scared shitless at the sight. I get it, but

Lev grabs his hand and tells him to go get a wet washcloth. Sometimes, Evie will wake up on her own after feeling us here, but tonight doesn't seem like one of those times.

He comes back to the room and holds out the cloth, but just like myself, I know he needs to do something.

“Just press it to her head and slowly move it down her neck,” I instruct him.

“What if she doesn't want me to touch her?” he asks hesitantly.

“I think we're all past that,” Lev says, moving Evie's hair back and securing it with a clip so it's out of her face.

Alexi gently touches the cloth to her face, and I can feel Evie's body as it gives up the fight. Her muscles relax one by one, and she starts sinking into my arms. I keep her close, letting the skin of my chest be her anchor as she breathes me in. Then she starts to cry.

That's something new and hasn't happened before the withdrawal. Lev gets into the bed next to me, and I slide her into his arms. She buries her face in his chest and lets it out. I rub her back and Alexi hovers over me, keeping the cloth on her body and gently dabbing away the sweat.

She hates this, I know. She hates looking weak. She hates everything about what this state does to her mind and how she can't do a damn thing to change it. When the sobbing stops she rolls over to face me. Her eyes are dark and haunted.

I think even when she's able to wake up from a dream, it doesn't really leave her completely. I know her, and I know there's no way she's going back to sleep after this. Lev and Alexi both look exhausted. Lev stayed up with her when this happened last night and took her for a run, so I decide to take my turn and don't give any of them a choice about it. I scoop her out of bed and into my arms.

“We're gonna go for a drive,” I tell others. “You guys go back to sleep, we will be back soon.”

“Keep her on the property,” Alexi says in a low tone.

I hadn't planned to take her off, especially after our little intruder came knocking, but I give him a nod anyway.

"I can walk," Evie says once we're out in the hall.

"Thanks for that information, Little Shadow. I was worried there for a moment that the nightmare took away your ability to use your legs." My voice drips sarcasm as I pull her closer to me and make it very clear I have zero intention to set her on her feet.

She doesn't argue. I think she knows I need this. I want to have her close after seeing her like that, just as much as she wants us to help her through it. I know she used to do it alone, but I never want her to have to go through that again.

Approaching my car in the garage, her gaze locks on the set of doors in the back that lead down to the basement. The hatred in her eyes is clear. She's fuming because that man brought back these nightmares and stripped her of her moment of peace.

Hopefully, I can bring it back to her, even if just for a moment.

I slide her into the electric purple corvette convertible and take the top off. It's cold as fuck outside, but the wind will bring us back to the world. There's something about the feeling of going fast and the cold biting into your flesh that wakes you up from the inside out. My little shadow needs to awaken.

Before I get in the car, I jog back inside to grab some blankets from the couches in a nearby sitting room. I toss them to Evie and she laughs, pulling one around her tightly and unclipping her hair. She likes to feel the wind just like I do.

I wrap a blanket around my torso since I'm still shirtless, but leave the front open so I can feel the air everywhere for a while. I wink at her before revving the engine and taking off at max speed, drifting through the gate the second it's fully open. Evie squeals over the roar of the engine and it's already like a weight is lifting from my shoulders. She throws her head back

as we reach the track. Her arms are up in the air as if she were riding a roller coaster.

I know these roads like the front of my hand. I would say the back, but I'm much more intimately acquainted with the front. *Who sits around and stares at the back of their hand all day anyway?*

I take the turns with an ease I didn't even realize I'd been missing. My father might have made me into a racer, but this is where I learned to drive. This track was everything to me, and my heart aches for my friend Dimitri. We would ride for hours out here when I didn't have the words to say. He never pushed me to talk, never asked about the bruises, but he *would* fake a report to my father about what I learned driving that day so that I was allowed to have a few moments of peace.

As my eyes slide back to my beautiful, silver-haired girl, I find that I not only get to steal a bit of peace tonight, but also happiness. A huge grin splits my face as I watch her cheeks redden from the wind and a smile cement itself on her lips. Very kissable, fuckable lips.

I feel my dick jerk in my sweats as thoughts of her mouth consume me. When she notices me staring, concern washes over her.

"Watch the road," she says, but I smirk in return, taking the next curve with ease without moving my eyes from my girl. I grab her chin and kiss her as I pick up speed. We're on a straight away, and I have three more seconds of her lips on mine before I'm going to need to hit the brakes and drift into the next turn.

Those three seconds are pure bliss, my soul suspended in time with hers. For just a moment, things don't hurt. For just one moment, the world doesn't cave in on us. But the second I pull my lips from hers, I watch as we drift into the turn. I can feel her slam back into reality the moment her eyes open. Her brow furrows while the weight of the world seems to settle into her shoulders, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

I take us to the edge of the property, toeing the line with Alexi but knowing Evie needs to see this view. The lake at

night is beautiful. The old docks have benches on them we had replaced when we were just boys who loved to disappear here, knowing it was the furthest we could get from our fathers.

As I pull up to them, snow starts to fall. I wrap my blanket around me and grab a spare from the back before lifting Evie into my arms. Laying the spare blanket on the bench, I pull her into my chest as I sit down, taking in the view.

The moon shines full and bright in the dark, wintry sky. Little white snowflakes cascade down around us. It feels almost like a dream, it's so perfect. That is, until I look down and see the tears in Evie's eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask her gently, tilting her face to mine.

"It's not fair," she breathes shakily. "Each snowflake has its purpose, its destiny to fall to the ground. To be part of this beautiful scene we're looking at. We don't think twice about stepping on one and ruining its destiny. We don't cry for the ones who fall to the water and never get to see their dreams fulfilled. Yet, they still fall, and the world still turns, as if everything will just keep on moving even when tragedy strikes or their journey ends."

"So you want to cry for the snowflakes?" I question, needing to understand her tears.

She shakes her head like I'm missing the whole point. If I were Lev, I'm sure I could come up with some profound answer to the nonsense she just spoke and it would light up her face. If I were Alexi, I would tell her not to focus on the things she can't change.

But I'm neither of them, and right now I can't help but think she needs me and that this moment was written for us in the stars since time began. So, I give her what I can.

"If you need to cry for the snowflakes, then cry for them. If you need to cry for yourself, then do that too. The world can't stop each time we hurt or it would never be able to give us the moment we need to move on. If everything stopped every time something went wrong, we would never make it to tonight, where we could count the stars."

She tilts her head up to the sky, the stars shining so brightly all around us. It's as magical as if we were in the land of fairies.

"It's pointless to count stars," she whispers.

I shrug. "It's also pointless to count freckles, but I happen to know you have three on your stomach and two on your leg. One on your ankle and one right beside the dimple on your left shoulder."

Her lips part slightly as her gaze locks with mine, and I can't help but to keep talking.

"When things in this life get too intense, I find myself counting your freckles and remembering the first time I saw each one. Each of them takes me back to a fond memory that tugs me from the edge. It anchors me to this world. Some people feel the same about the stars. They use them as their anchor."

I lean in close, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her into my lap.

"But we have to live through the day to see them. We have to fight our demons in the night to keep them. It may seem pointless now, but I promise the next time you look at that star," I point to one directly above us, "you'll think of this moment."

Crushing her lips to mine, I lick the tears that fall from her lips. Her cold nose brushes against my cheek, and I pull her closer to give her all my warmth. Reminding her that the bad days are not what define us. We pull back from the kiss breathless. She settles into my chest, looking up at the stars with me.

"I just wish the ache would stop. I hate that this controls me. I hate that even though I'm able to sleep now, I still worry about waking up like this and then forcing you guys to feel sucked into helping me."

"We want to help you," I insist, but I know what she means.

"It doesn't mean I want to be helped. Sometimes, I need to prove to myself I can fight my own battles. As much as I want

you all to always be there, I don't want to need you there. I need to be able to sit with myself in the dark and know that I'll be okay."

"You will be."

"How do you know?" She pushes up then to look at me, so desperate for any answer to this crazy idea she's concocted in her head.

"Because you've been doing it since before you even knew us. Because you're strong and fierce. Because you are a fire that burns brighter than any darkness could summon the power to smother. You may hurt, ache, mourn, and grieve. But you will always be okay. With or without us."

"I don't feel okay," she admits. My muscles go rigid as if it's getting ready for a battle. But I can't fight the demons in her head.

"What if we could help you with that?" I don't want to push her, but I also don't want to see her break like this.

"How?" Her hand tightens around the blanket wrapped around my chest.

"What if we took you to someone who could help?"

"No." Her voice is colder than the air surrounding us. I can tell she's retreated into a small part of herself. Which is exactly what I was afraid of.

I move her on my lap so she's straddling me, but her head is hanging low. I tilt her chin up to look at me.

"You know how much I want you safe. How much we *all* want you safe. Dr. K is someone Alexi and I trust. If you feel ready to talk and start working through things, we will get you an appointment with her."

"I don't think I'll ever be ready for another person to force drugs on me or look at me like I'm broken. I'm aware of my state and no one else needs to see that. It's bad enough that the three of you see it!"

Her voice rises to a near shout, but I know her. This reaction is out of fear, not anger.

“Do you trust me?” My voice is calm but commanding.

“Yes.” Some of the fight leaves her, but her shoulders are still tense.

She pushes off of me to walk the snow coated dock barefoot, not even seeming to notice the cold.

“I trust you, but I don’t know how I could trust her. I’m glad the two of you have someone, but I would rather die than take any medication ever again. I can’t feel that way again.”

Her voice trembles and I stand up, pulling her into me as I wrap my arms around her.

“No meds, Little Shadow. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. Alexi may take medications, but I don’t need them. We are all different in what we need to make our heads not spin lies and half truths into our system. For me, staying sober and talking through my issues to find ways to cope is enough. Let’s just find out what is enough for you so you don’t have to fear falling asleep next to us, okay?”

A sob escapes her lips, but she’s nodding into my chest. I know she hates this, and I hate it for her. So I can only hope Dr. K can find a way to help her too.



Chapter 23

We get back to the house around six in the morning. Damien put the top back up, and the warm air seeped into my bones until I finally stopped shaking. To be honest, I can no longer tell if the shaking was from the anxiety, the panic, or the cold.

Alexi is waiting at the door to the garage for us when we pull in. A small smile tugs at my lips. My eyes must be red, and my cheeks sting from the cold mixed with the tears, but seeing him takes a piece of the ache away.

I get out of the car and throw my arms around him. Damien gives him a nod and a pat on the shoulder before walking in, seeming to silently communicate something with him.

“Was the therapy your idea?” I ask, realization dawning on me at the look of concern written all over his face.

He reaches to scratch the back of his head, tempting me with his beautiful muscles on display.

“It was sort of all of our idea; I think I was just the one to suggest it out loud.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I don’t know why he felt he had to send Damien to talk to me about it.

“I wanted to, but you saw how I freaked out when you found my medications. I thought maybe I wasn’t the right person to ask you to trust someone like that again. Especially not someone who’s tied so closely to me. I only just started opening up to the boys about it, and it felt hypocritical for me to ask something of you I haven’t even fully come to terms with yet.”

I sigh, understanding his reasoning, but wishing he would trust me more than that. There’s still hurt and resentment at the foundation of our relationship, no matter how much I wanted there to be a clean slate for us. Those thoughts and memories will always haunt us.

“You can talk to me about these things,” I tell him seriously. “I trust you. I trust all of you. Even though it may be hard to hear, I promise I’ll try to listen.”

He nods but still looks like he wants to say something to me.

“Spit it out, Batman.”

“Why do you call me that?”

His question throws me off; I hardly realized I had been using the little nickname for him. It just seemed to fit one day.

“Because you’re my Dark Knight, an angel in disguise. You may be all black on the outside. Terrifying and hiding from the rest of the world, but to me, you’re the savior of the story.”

“Angels are supposed to be saviors. They are the ones that keep you in the light. I’m only darkness, Princess.”

“If you think angels only walk in the light, then I think you missed the point of who they are supposed to be.”

“What do you mean?”

The idea of him being an angel must really throw him off because I don't think I've ever seen this man look more confused.

“I don't believe in a lot of things, but I do believe there is something out there and that the angels we see in our darkest moments are sent to us. Angels don't walk in the light, Alexi. They don't make our lives easy or our battles less strenuous. The point of them is to stick with us. When the dark is closing in, surrounding us with no way out, they show us the light. They don't save us from our darkness, but they can empower us enough to learn to save ourselves from it.”

“So what, I'm your dark angel then?”

My lips lift in a full grin, loving even more that this whole concept confuses him. I stand on my tiptoes and kiss his lips ever so gently.

“You're the one who showed me the light in the dark. Damien may be my sunshine, making me laugh and smile. But you, Alexi, you're my hope. You're the vigilante who comes in the night to save us all.”

Clarity washes over his eyes before he steals another kiss from my lips. It's punishing and brutal. When my head knocks against the wall, followed by my body, I let out a whimper of pure need for him.

He leans down and whispers in my ear, “I read your list, dirty girl. Do you want to be mine? Are you ready for me to show you just who your Daddy is?”

Goosebumps cascade down my body, erupting from the exact spot his breath touches my neck.

“Yes,” I say in a breathless moan.

I want nothing more in this moment than to show him I'm his in all the ways he enjoys because I think I will enjoy them all too.

He lifts me in his arms, my legs going around his waist as he carries me to my room. He trails kisses down my chest as

he moves, leaving me to cling to him as my body melts into his.

When we reach the door, he works my t-shirt over my head and tosses it to the floor, then his follows.

“Take a deep breath, Princess,” Alexi commands.

I do as I’m told, and the second my lungs are full, his hand goes around my throat.

He shoves my back against the wall, and with another squeeze he takes away any ability to make a single noise. His other hand reaches down and tears my shorts in half. The shredded pajamas slide down my legs and when the ripped material reaches my ankles, I kick them aside.

I’m already so wet for him. I can feel my arousal dripping down my legs from his show of dominance. Alexi knows just how to make me crave his monster, and I love when he lets him out to play.

“Tap my hand twice if you’re going to pass out.”

The second I nod, he spears me with his fingers. My mouth opens to cry out in ecstasy, but no sound escapes.

My legs start to tremble under his brutality. The pain is intoxicating, already working me toward the edge.

Suddenly, he removes his fingers, leaving me empty. I buck my hips forward, craving more. He pulls his pants down with one hand and I try to wimper. *I need him*. As if he could read my mind, he looks me in the eyes while hooking one leg over his free arm.

“Don’t worry, Princess. Daddy knows exactly what you need.”

He lines himself up before thrusting his cock deep inside me. Spots start to dot my vision as he fucks me with all the fury of a tropical storm. A few seconds later, I’m forced to tap his hand.

He squeezes one final time, making the leg I’m standing on go weak. When he lets go, I suck in a deep breath right as he

pinches my clit, and my orgasm barrels into me like a wave crashing down. It feels *so fucking good*.

“That’s it, come for Daddy. Clench around me. Fuck.”

He pinches the sensitive nub one more time before hooking both of my legs over his arms. I can feel him swell even larger as he pounds deeper inside me.

“Give me one more, show Daddy how good you can be.”

My body reacts to his dirty words, but it isn’t until he gives me something from my list that makes me lose control. He leans over and spits right in my mouth. I detonate like an atomic bomb. He grunts as he fucks me through it, and I can see he’s trying to hold on until the end.

As soon as my body starts to go slack, he buries himself *so* deep. I can feel the pulsing of his cock as he grunts into my neck. Without pulling out, he carries me over to the bed, kicking his pants off the rest of the way as he goes. Gently he places a pillow under my ass as he lays me down.

“What are you doing?” I ask, slightly confused.

Slowly he pulls out, his eyes locked on his cock as it emerges, and I can’t help the heat that floods to my cheeks. He moves between my legs, using two fingers to scoop up the cum that dripped out.

“I’m making sure not a single drop goes to waste,” he says, shoving two fingers inside me to plant his cum back where it belongs.

It’s dirty, unhinged, and so fucking him.

He just gave me two orgasms and yet, here I am, turned on all over again.

He crawls up my body, “I want Lev to taste me the next time he goes down on you,” he says as his hand forces my mouth open.

“And when he asks whose cum is on his tongue,” Alexi spits in my mouth again and watches as my throat swallows. “I want you to tell him it’s your Daddy’s.”

If I thought I was turned on before, this is a whole new level. My body arches toward him, and his fingers splay across my stomach as I take his face in my hands.

“Yes, sir,” I respond, watching his eyes dilate with heat.

He kisses me hard, and that’s what I love about him. I love being cherished and protected. But brutality is also a close friend, and I trust him to use it in a way I’ll enjoy. Not in a way that’s meant to hurt me. My body squirms beneath him causing him to chuckle into my mouth.

“Such a needy little whore,” he says, moving his hand down between our body’s to tease my entrance. “Don’t worry, Princess. I’m not done with you yet.”

His mouth works its way down to my peaked nipples, sucking and scraping his teeth as my hips move of their own accord, riding his hand and chasing my pleasure without a care in the world. This is what I needed. Him to ground me, to remind me that not everything in the world is meant to hurt me.

“Oh god,” I cry out as I start getting close again and a flash of anger crosses Alexi’s features.

His fingers stop their movements, and a whimper escapes me. I was so fucking close. “What did you just say, Princess?”

I realize a second too late that I messed up, too caught up in the bliss of everything he was giving me I forgot not to call out to anyone but my daddy. His hand slides up to my neck, his fingers flexing and moving around my throat as he hovers over me.

But he doesn’t scare me, I don’t think he ever really did. He’s mine just as much as I’m his.

“Punish me, Daddy.” I smirk and his nostrils flare a second before he flips me onto my front. “Hands above your head, Princess. Lock them.”

I do as he says, turning my face to the side so I can breathe and lock my hands together above me.

“Don’t you move them until I say so, got it?”

I nod my head but a firm smack lands on my ass, making me yelp.

“Use your words or this stops.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I say instantly, not wanting this moment to end.

His hand rubs over the area he just smacked, soothing away the hurt so gently it’s hard to believe he’s the one that put it there.

“Such a good girl for me.”

He gets off the bed and I try to see what he’s doing, but my hair is in the way and he didn’t tell me I could move, so I do my best to stay still. Then, a vibrating sound kicks up, and I almost sit straight up.

“Relax,” Alexi says as the sound gets louder. The pillow is now under my front, and I feel Alexi moving some rope around my thighs and push my ass up into the air. Then the vibrator is pressed right against my clit. The pleasure is welcome but also very intense all at once. I hear the sound of a lid opening and two cold fingers are pressing on my ass.

“You ever been fucked here, Princess?”

I shake my head, then remember I’m supposed to use my words.

“No, sir.”

“Do you want to be?”

The vibration feels so good that when his fingers press to my tight hole, it’s euphoric. I rated anal as a maybe, but right now I feel like I should be giving it a bright fucking green light because I want nothing more than for him to sink his fingers deep inside me.

“Yes, Daddy, please...”

I remember a time where I thought begging would make me feel weak. Yet, the sound that comes from his mouth in response to my submission, makes me feel like I’m the one that holds all the power.

Two fingers slide slowly into my ass, torturing me with the promise of bliss. But once he starts moving them, I swear I never even knew what a real orgasm was until now.

A cry escapes my lips as I come, clenching his fingers in a way I didn't even know was possible. He curses behind me and as I come down, the vibrations feel too intense on my sensitive nub. I try to wiggle away from it, but it's no use. Whatever he did with those ropes has this device securely tethered to my clit.

"You wanted to be punished, baby girl. So, take it." Alexi says, as I feel his cock line up with my ass.

Part of me wants to call it, to tap out now so that nemesis of mine that seems to leave me sore and craving more all at once will be powered down. But as Alexi pushes the head of his dick into my ass, I forget all thoughts of a safe word and fall into bliss again.

"Shit, baby girl, I knew you could take me," he says as he slides another inch in. My head is swimming, like I'm under water, but my body is caught up in so much pleasure I can't tell if I'm laying on a bed or floating.

I suck in a sharp breath as he pushes all the way in; I feel so full I could scream. It's utter bliss. My eyes nearly roll into the back of my head as he starts up a slow rhythm.

"Such a good girl for Daddy, letting me fuck your ass. You won't forget my name ever again, will you Princess?"

"Never," I pant, so close to another orgasm I could scream.

He wraps his arm around me and clicks a button on the vibrator, making the vibrations pulse instead of a steady thrum. The moments of silence between each rumble have me on edge, bringing me closer and closer.

"You want me to come inside this ass? Mark every hole of yours as mine?"

"Daddy!" I scream as his filthy words send me over the edge just as I feel him coming inside of me, his pulsating shaft in my ass satisfying a part of me I didn't know I needed. My

nipples feel numb until his hand trails up and pinches one, and I swear the orgasm doubles in intensity.

“Fuck, fuck,” Alexi pants as he finishes inside me.

My body falls to the bed, no strength left to hold me up. Every muscle feels worn and satiated at the same time. I take a deep breath, and for the first time in a long time, I feel like my lungs fully inflate. I’m left feeling whole, swimming in utter peace.



After getting cleaned up and taking a very long nap together, I wake up in the arms of my dark angel. His black hair is longer now, falling into his face as he sleeps. It’s the most peaceful I’ve ever seen him, and I find myself holding my breath because I don’t want to wake him.

These past two weeks have taken a toll on all of us. Now that we’re creating a plan for revenge, I have a feeling these small moments of stealing peace in each other’s arms will become fewer and farther between.

I brush his hair back and bright blue, sleep dazed eyes slowly blink at me. I swear his eyes are like an ocean, one I’d gladly let drown me. We don’t speak for a while, just stare at each other and let the peace settle into our hearts while we can.

He touches his forehead to mine and I wrap my hand around his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. It’s slow and says all the things we want to say but don’t have the words for. We separate and he rolls over to check the time. His posture stiffens, making my brows pinch in concern.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him softly.

“I have a video call with Dr. K in an hour.”

The way Damien spoke about her makes me consider talking to her, but Alexi’s posture forces me to reconsider. If she helps him, why is he so tense?

“Would you…” he trails off, seeming to think better of finishing his question. I push myself to sit up and look at him.

“Would I what?”

He shakes his head at me, but I meant it before when I said he can talk to me about these things.

“Do you not want to talk to her?”

If she’s causing him stress or any issues he can find someone else. Damien might like her, but if she makes Alexi as uncomfortable as he’s acting right now, I don’t want him talking to her.

Alexi tilts his head, seeming to see where my thoughts are going as he pushes himself up.

“No, I really love talking to her; she’s great at making me see things in a different light and not making me feel bad about my anger.”

Well now I’m confused.

“I was going to ask you if you wanted to talk to her with me, like a joint session?”

He speaks so soft and quiet I think I almost imagine the words. My thoughts go to the last session I had. How the therapist rolled her eyes when I talked about the night terrors. It made me feel like a child with a stupid nightmare that I just need to get over.

“Your dreams are just that, dreams. When your eyes open it’s over. So there’s no point in holding onto them or letting them define your day.” The woman in a pantsuit and spiky red heels says to me, looking down her nose at me in what feels like an attempt to make me feel small.

“But that’s the thing, it’s not a dream, it was real. It happened to me, and I don’t know how to let it go.” My chest aches at having to relive this with her, seeing the way she looks at me. I already know I’m broken. I don’t need her to point that out. I need her help.

“Reliving the past doesn’t help you move forward either. Find your reason to move on. You want revenge, so focus on that, only that, and let the bad memories stay in the past where they belong.”

I can already tell I'm not getting anywhere with her, I'll have to hang up this call feeling worse, then find a way to convince my uncle to get me a new therapist.

Her eyes soften just a little, seeming to see the attitude in my eyes.

"Look, you're still taking your medications, right?" she questions gently.

"Yes." I nod with my head down. I'm a fully-fledged assassin and when I talk to this woman, I feel smaller than an ant under her deadly heel.

"Give them time to start working, let them show you how to focus your anger into one thing, one task, then use that to make you feel better again. Find a purpose and cling to it. Cling to your revenge so that once you claim it, no one will believe you're a scared little girl anymore."

Alexi notices the change in me and takes my hand in his, bringing me back to the present. I let out a shuddering breath and try not to let that broken girl rise to the surface. But she's always there, just beneath the shadows I let coat my skin, to convince myself *I'm* the monster that should be feared.

"It was stupid, I'm sorry for bringing it up." Alexi kisses my hand and moves to get off the bed.

"No medications," I say, making the decision to truly trust them.

Alexi freezes with the blankets half off him. If they think this woman can help me, then I really want to try. "No medications, and if she makes me feel like an idiot or scolds me in any way, I'm walking out."

"Are you sure?" The shock in his voice is clear, and I find I really enjoy taking him by surprise.

"You'll be there, right?"

"Always," he vows. The sincerity in it is so deep I know in my soul I can trust him.

"Then I trust you."



The call starts up as Alexi and I get comfortable on the bed with his computer in his lap. I'm curled into his side and my heart rate kicks up with each ring. Alexi threads his fingers through mine, calming some of my nerves.

A kind looking woman with soft blue eyes answers a moment later. "I'm so sorry, Alexi. I spilled my coffee all over my desk and needed a moment to wipe it up."

She moves some of the hair away from her face as her kind eyes seem to settle on me.

"Hello, Evie, sorry it took me a moment to answer. It's a pleasure to meet you."

I give her a soft smile.

"Hello," I say, but I can't seem to think of much more to add so I just look at Alexi.

"Hey, Dr. K. Good to meet with you again."

She smiles at him but not like a girl who has a crush, more like a mother would in adoration of a child. Her gentle features make me want to trust her. The way Alexi seems to relax so quickly in her presence tells me maybe I could.

They talk for a bit, catching up on life since he traveled to the island. He tells her about how we met and all the awful and crazy things that happened between us. All the while, not a single judgmental word is made to him or me. She validates our feelings and encourages him when he's at a loss for words.

She asks me about my parents and I open up a little bit, but I don't give her the story of their deaths. Then, she asks Alexi about his mother and how he's coping with her being gone now that he has a woman in his life.

"To be honest, sometimes it's hard. I think about picking up my phone to call and tell her about Evie a lot."

My heart tugs at his admission, and I find myself drawing closer to him.

“When Evie and I were very young, we met at a gala. I remember being so in love with her that it hurt. I told my mother I wanted to marry her.”

I gasp lightly in surprise, thinking back to that night with him and how perfect our lives were at that time. I squeeze his hand, hoping in some small way, he knows I felt the same even back then.

“And has your position on marriage seemed to change now that you’re with Evie?” Dr. K asks, no pressure in her words.

Alexi looks at me, and I’m taken aback with how child-like he seems, almost too shy to admit his crush on a girl.

“Sometimes,” he confesses.

“How does that make you feel, Evie?” she asks me next, but I’m still caught up in Alexi’s expression.

It’s surprising that I’ve managed to shake his idea of what he thought he wanted for his life.

“I feel...” I take a moment to think about how to put it into words.

I never thought of marriage before, not until Damien and Lev asked me. I realize now I haven’t even told Alexi about it yet, and I feel awful. My gut knots at the idea of it hurting him. Tears spring into my eyes, causing Alexi’s face to change from that of a child to a man ready to go on a killing spree.

“A few days ago, Damien and Lev asked me if I would marry them.” I see the shock cross his features, and then he slides on the mask that I never know how to read. My heart aches at the idea of him being mad at me over my response, but I don’t want any lies between us.

“I told them if I said yes it didn’t mean I wasn’t choosing you too.”

“What was your answer, Princess?” He uses my nickname but none of his gentle expressions come with it.

“I said yes,” I say, tilting my head down as a few tears fall from my eyes.

I've been working so hard on not letting them fall and accepting that when they do, it's because I need it. But the last thing I truly wanted right now was to cry.

Alexi's fingers lift my chin. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you. If you never want that from me then that's okay. I never knew I wanted it until they asked."

Silence stretches out between us and even the great Dr. K doesn't have anything to add. Maybe this was the wrong time to bring it up. I'm not good at this. I don't know how to open myself up or talk through this shit.

"How does that make you feel, Alexi?" Dr. K asks after what feels like hours pass.

"Sad." It's all he says. My heart feels like it's being shattered before he starts speaking again.

"I'm sad because I wish it was something we could have all discussed. I'm sad because if we asked you, I would have preferred it be all of us together. I'm sad because you think you did something wrong by loving my brothers. And I'm sad because you feel like you still have to hide parts of yourself from me out of fear over how I'll react."

My lips part in shock. I don't know what to say to that. I hate that he's sad, but I also just heard a man who apparently swore off all possibilities about marriage say that he would have asked me eventually.

"But," he continues and my heart swells in my chest, the shattered pieces seeming to come back together. "I'm sure as fuck glad that I still have the chance to propose to you and make it even better than theirs."

He lets the mask slide away. The grin that splits across his face is one I've never seen before. It's sunshine and rain. It's love and it's hope.

I wrap my arms around his neck as he pulls me into his lap, moving to set the computer to our side. He holds me so tight I swear the atoms between us are touching. I lean back and kiss him and he kisses me back with purpose.

“Uh um,” a cough breaks us apart, and I start to laugh.

We apologize as we separate and focus our attention back to Dr. K, whose cheeks look as red as her hair. “It’s alright, I’m honestly proud that the two of you have such effective communication.”

“Thank you,” Alexi says with a faint blush.

“Alexi, would you like to talk some more about your mother?”

The second Dr. K changes the subject back to his mother, Alexi tenses. I squeeze his hand, unsure if my presence helps him at all in this moment or not but wanting to give him something to anchor to.

“Being home has made me think of her more than usual. She always had this way of making this giant house feel like a home. I didn’t think it would feel like that ever again, but it’s beginning to,” he says before coughing. “When she was killed, I remember my father shutting down so quickly. I never understood it. Now that he’s trying to be closer to me, and I almost lost Evie, I think I get it more now.”

Why does therapy always hurt? I hate that these bad memories are brought up for him to live through again and again. It’s no different than my night terrors, the trauma being thrown in my face time and time again. When does it fucking stop?

“Evie was attacked on the island and part of it was our fault. She was alone and vulnerable because of us, and I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive myself for that. When I saw her in that hospital bed so pale, the relief was tarnished with the knowledge that I had a part in her ending up there. I imagine that’s how my father felt when he saw my mother’s lifeless body on that table. I know the only reason I was able to keep going was because I knew Evie was breathing, but he didn’t have that. And while I know that doesn’t make it okay, I think the only reason I’m able to forgive him for shutting me out is because I get it now.”

The more Alexi talks, the more I understand it. He relaxes with each story he tells. Eventually, we're laughing and reflecting on the happy memories of Alexi as a boy, cooking with his mother and getting chocolate all over. I can see that maybe this is the point. Maybe, just maybe, talking about the bad helps us to lift the veil and see through to the good.

"Evie," Dr. K breaks me from my thoughts. "How are you feeling? Would you like to open up more about your parents?"

Her eyes stay on me, and I find myself wanting to trust her like Alexi and Damien seem to.

"They um," I search for the right words. "I think they were always afraid for me. Looking back, I remember my father teaching me so many things I never thought twice about until he was gone. He started teaching me to use a blade at nine and throw it at ten. He taught me to ride a dirt bike when I was seven, but it wasn't in a fun way. It was in case I ever needed to escape. We would wrestle sometimes too. I remember times where he would get worked up when I didn't grasp a concept." I look down and pick at the hem of my shirt. Talking about my parents has never been easy for me. But I want to keep trying and give myself a chance.

"My mother always wanted me close, even if we were in the house together. She would set up my school work on the island while she cooked dinner. Any time I ventured too far, she would always find me."

More things start to come together in my mind as I process it all. It's rare that I talk about them and even rarer for me to think back on the time we spent together.

"I think that's what hurt most about them dying, I never got to hear it from them why they wanted me to learn these things so badly."

"That's valid," Dr. K says. "It's okay to be frustrated with them even though they are gone. You don't have to excuse their actions or put them on a pedestal because they died. You deserve to feel how you feel and process that. Then, find a way to forgive them that isn't just forgetting."

I let that sink in for a moment, realizing she's right. One of the reasons I didn't want to think of the good times is because, in a way, I'm still angry with them. I'm angry my mother left that safe room. I'm angry they never told me about anything they did. I'm angry they made the deal with Boris in the first place.

“What happened after they died?”

While the question is definitely a logical progression, it hits me like a ton of bricks landing on my chest. I think about Havoc pulling me out of that safe room and tying me up. I think about my uncle pretending to be the savior. All the lies and promises he whispered in my ear to get me to do his bidding.

Then the time he sent me away, the knowledge that he tagged me like I was his cattle after he found me and buried the tracker deep into a scar I can hardly look at today. My breaths are short and I feel heavy, like I'm strapped to the mattress below me. I'm stuck there just like I was on that torture table.

The ache between my legs starts to feel more like pain as I remember them taking and taking until I was sure there was nothing left of me. I was an empty vessel for them to toy with and...

“Evie!” Dr. K shouts, pulling me from the dark tunnel.

Alexi is holding a hand out, but it's just shy of touching me and I'm so fucking thankful he didn't. I cover my mouth as a choked sob comes from me. When Alexi pulls me to him, I let his warmth ground me and keep my eyes wide open, refusing to fall into the embrace of those memories again.

“Just let her lay there, Alexi. Soft, consistent touches. Keep your hands moving.”

I think about how Damien always does that, his thumb circling the back of my hand or my thigh anytime I start to panic. She must have taught him that. I'm so grateful to her right now. All I can do is stare at the screen as a look of understanding passes between us. She's not judgemental; she

doesn't yell or tell me to get over it. She sits in the silence with me as I come back to reality and shake off the memories.

"You're doing great, Evie. I'm so proud of you for how much you opened up."

"I ruined it," I say in a low, defeated voice. My meltdown messed with all the progress we had been making.

"You didn't ruin anything, Evie. You talked about something hard and it overwhelmed you. There's nothing wrong with that. Talking about our feelings isn't easy, and the things that have been done to your mind aren't something that should be expected to be fixed in a single one hour session." She smiles at me and I nod, trying to understand.

"We all need time to process change, to process grief. We have to teach our minds that we control it, not the other way around, and that takes time. It's not easy, and this isn't a place where you will ever be judged for the way you need to work through it."

The stern tone in her voice makes me believe her. I want so desperately to believe her—that I might not be broken forever. But I hate this feeling, and if this is what I have to face during my time with her, I don't see myself ever willingly doing it again.

So I nod my head and bury my face in Alexi's lap so neither of them have to see the truth in my eyes. I didn't want to fail Alexi and Damien here, but I can't help but think somehow I have.



Chapter 24

I end the call and send Dr. K a text saying I'll call her back soon. Evie's face is still in my lap, and she needs my attention first. She has no idea how well she did for the first session. I want her to know how proud of her I am.

"Princess?" Rubbing her back, I gently turn her to look up at me. Her eyes are red and her cheeks puffy. "I'm so fucking proud of you."

Her face scrunches up in confusion. I help her sit up next to me.

"I don't think I was able to get out a single thing the first time I talked to her. The fact that you felt comfortable enough to open up at all shows just how strong you are."

She looks away from me in disbelief.

“I don’t know if I can do that again.” The defeated sound in her voice stabs at my chest.

“Do you think I would see you differently if you never talked to another therapist again for the rest of your life?” I question, trying to figure out why she feels the need to look away from me.

“Maybe,” her gaze meets mine again after a moment, her familiar spark of defiance reigniting. “Is it so wrong that maybe I don’t want help, maybe I just want to be fine with who I am?”

“Did anyone say that was wrong?” I can see her insecurities shining through now. She’s not fooling anyone.

If she wants soft and sweet, she can go talk to Lev about this. But I’m me, and when she makes these absurdly irrational ideas a reality in her mind, I refuse to let her hide in them.

“If it’s not wrong then why did you ask me to talk to her?” Her attitude is in full swing. I cannot wait to put her back in her place.

“I asked you to talk to her because seeing you in pain makes me want to murder people.” I grip her face in my hands, not enough to hurt, but enough to drive the point home. “I don’t care who they are or what they’ve done, but someone’s blood will run like a river between my fingers every time I see you wake up in that panic. I’m okay with that. I don’t care how many people I need to kill to satisfy the demon in me, the one that wants to keep and protect you and slaughter anyone who gets close to you.”

Her jaw visibly drops open at my admission, but I need her to understand just how much we *all* care.

“Damien suggested it because a piece of him is reminded of the pain his father caused him every time he sees a tear fall from your eyes. And we both know the monster he can be when he hunts for revenge.” Wiping a tear from her face, I relax my hands as I kiss her cheek.

“He wanted you to be able to fall asleep in our arms and wake up feeling whole and rested. He didn’t want anyone

holding a piece of you that you didn't willingly give. Lev agreed to all of this because you're the first thing he's ever taken for himself, and he wants you to be able to let go of your past and not let it define you. We didn't do any of this because there is something wrong with you. We did this because we *love* you with every fiber of our beings."

Her bottom lip trembles, and I take my thumb to swipe over it. She breathes me in as I get close and wraps her arms around me as our foreheads touch. It's gentle and sweet and nothing like what I had done to her this morning, but it feels right. I've never wanted to be soft with anyone, never cared enough to know someone's heart before. Usually, I just played out my role with them to help banish my demons.

"I love you," I whisper carefully, so she knows I did not just say that for dramatics. She is it for me. I love her more than the air I breathe.

"I love you too," she whispers back to me. "I love all of you so much that I'm terrified. I've been afraid of this love and connection for so long. And now I'm afraid because if *he* finds out about it, he will find a way to ruin it. I know he will."

"The three of us are already ruined. You are what makes us whole. So long as we have you, we'll be okay."

Her lips caress mine, so feather light I would have missed it if it wasn't all I was focused on. Laying us back on the bed, she tucks herself in close to me while I pull her tight to my side, not wanting even air to separate us.

"I'm so tired of running," she murmurs as she dozes off on my chest.

"Then stop running, Princess."

"I'll talk to her again. I think I just need some time."

I kiss her forehead, grateful she is able to come to terms with this idea herself. "Take all the time you need."



After dinner, Evie says she's going to go take a long bubble bath and listen to some music. Her legs were still shaking from how hard I made her come on my tongue before we headed down here. A smirk plays on my lips as we all watch her leave. My father dismisses himself while Laney and Havoc head to training, so it's just me and my boys.

"So, how did things go today?" Damien asks in a hushed tone, even though Evie is easily a hundred feet away with multiple doors separating us.

"She did really well," I say, not wanting to give them more than Evie would be comfortable with, but also needing to give them something.

"That's great man," Damien says, clapping me on the back and getting up to leave, but I stop him.

"I texted Dr. K after our session. Evie is nervous to go back because she ended up having a panic attack. Dr. K helped me get her through it. She was also proud of how well she did and the fact that she opened up in general, but..."

I let the thought hang in the air. When Damien sits back down, he already seems to know what I'm going to say. Lev watches us both with interest.

"But?" Lev questions.

"She thinks we should tell Evie about trauma play and subspace healing."

The room goes silent. I know Lev knows a little about what Damien and I have been through. He knows just how much Dr. K has helped us, but a big reason she was able to do that was because she introduced us to BDSM as part of our therapy. She is, after all, a licensed psychologist, sexologist, and kink coach.

She was able to find me a mentor who understood my primal need for dominance and pain control. He taught me how to enact it in a way that made me feel like I was in charge. Dr. K taught Damien a different path, one he seemed to catch onto right away, with orgasm control and edging. We both consider ourselves Doms, although our approaches differ. I

found the Daddy kink alluring because it gave me power but also let me provide, while Damien dove head first into toys and games.

I haven't opened up to Damien much, but he has opened up to me. In this small world, I feel like we understand each other on a different level. I want these things for Evie too, but part of me is worried that once she sees the fucked up shit I'm into, she will run away.

I know she just saw a big part of me, but the other things I'm into can scare people easily, and I don't want to be someone she fears.

"What's subspace healing?" Lev asks.

"It's not something that is used often, however, the idea behind it is to basically break down the barriers someone may build in response to trauma. Subspace is a moment, or a series of moments, where your submissive gives you full control, and in return for that, they receive the euphoric feeling of floating or flying. They are susceptible to suggestions because they trust your orders would not put them in harm's way."

"I've felt that before with D, is that something we should be concerned about with Evie?" Lev questions.

"It is done out of trust and understanding that it won't be abused. When you leave the subspace, it can cause your endorphins to crash. Thus, resulting in a feeling of depression or anxiety. This state can also leave you open and numb. It's a vulnerable place to be, and we've always been instructed to take it seriously."

"So, that's why Evie started crying after we all got together last time? Damien said she had a sub drop." Lev begins to understand more so I keep going.

"Exactly. Seeing Evie go through that sub drop while we did not have the supplies or anything in order to help her through it scared the shit out of me. It's possible for drops to last for days, and we weren't prepared for something like that." I take a deep breath, knowing the idea would not have been approached if Dr. K did not believe we were capable.

“However, if this were something she were to agree to, the point would be to get her to enter the subspace because you’re numb to the brain’s ability to panic since you’re dumping endorphins. Thus, leaving her able to talk about her trauma or even reflect on it without causing a panic.”

“That sounds like it could be helpful but really complicated.” Lev says, no judgment in his tone. “Why do you seem so agitated by it?”

“It takes a lot of trust. And these drops can happen easily after you enter the subspace, which usually don’t feel good. I don’t think I’ve earned that level of trust from her yet, and I sure as shit know that her trauma is going to be a lot to face even without the panic.”

“You know Dr. K wouldn’t suggest it unless she really thought it would help,” Damien says, only reinforcing my earlier thought. “She doesn’t suggest this stuff to just anyone. She probably thinks that because Evie has us, it’s a good idea.” I know he’s right. I have trusted Dr. K for years now and she has not once given me a reason to doubt her.

“She did say that Evie comes out of the panic quickly and seems to trust me as an anchor, even though I didn’t really know what I was doing in the moment.”

“So?” Lev asks. “What does this mean?”

“It means,” I say, setting my wine down, not seeming to have a taste for it this evening, “when the time feels right, we can talk to her about it. We don’t do anything like this without her consent.”

“I think she gave her consent to you pretty loud and clear, bro,” Damien says with a full smirk on his face. “Hearing her scream for ‘daddy’ had me torn between running in there to join and jerking off in our room.”

The side of my lip lifts slightly, and I give him a snort. It’s getting easier to open up around them. I know I never had to shut myself off from them, but I couldn’t bear the idea of losing anyone else close, so I kept them at arm’s length. I’m starting to realize that it hurt us all more than helped us. We’ve

all been fighting our battles separately when we should have come together from the start. Now, with Evie in the equation, that wall I so carefully constructed around myself hasn't just crumbled, it's been obliterated.

I watch as my friends, my family, joke around and open up. Slowly, I am coming to find it easier to let the real me be seen and to hold the ones I love close because we never know when a moment is going to be our last.



Chapter 25

My nerves are on edge as I knock on Evie's door. I asked her if I could take her on a date today. It's Christmas Eve, and I want to do something special for my girl by showing her a part of me no one else gets to see.

She opens the door to reveal herself standing in a beautiful midnight blue dress. Her hair is curled and cascading down her back with her bangs hanging just above her eyes. She looks ethereal, like she stole a glimpse of moonlight straight from the sky.

"Shit," I breathe, unable to speak as the look on her face seems to say she'd be open to skipping this date and getting right to the sex part.

"Do you like it, Ghost?" she asks, giving me a spin.

The scars on her back are on full display, and I couldn't be more proud of her. She's said she doesn't want her scars to rule the way she feels about her body, and in this dress, the marks on her skin only add to the goddess-like beauty she carries.

"You look like heaven and sin all wrapped in one." I grab her arm and pull her into me, kissing her breathless. I force myself to pull away but don't let her go far. Instead, I tuck her under my arm and direct her towards the garage.

"You gonna tell me where you're taking me?" She bats her eyelashes at me.

"Nope," I say with a grin. I love keeping her in suspense like this.

"Am I overdressed?" she asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

"You're perfect." Squeezing her shoulders, I direct her to my car before opening the door for her.

"Such a gentleman," she teases, kissing me on the cheek before she tucks herself in.

My face turns to fire where her lips touched. I find myself holding my hand to that spot, not wanting her warmth to go far. My nerves have my heart racing, but not nearly as much as seeing her in that dress.

I get behind the wheel and take a deep breath before starting it up. She notices my hesitation and takes my hand. "You okay?"

"I'm good." I give her a smile that's only a little forced.

She sees right through me, but doesn't comment, only squeezes my hand tighter. We drive for over thirty minutes. I specifically had to get Alexi's permission for this, and as we approach the tall white building, I can see his security already posted around it. Evie's brows lift as the warehouse comes into view but I can't get a word out.

My chest tightens and my throat feels like it's constricting with each second we get closer. I park right outside the door as

all of the guards turn their backs to us. Alexi gave them strict instructions not to take a look at who I have with me tonight. They all fall in line without hesitation.

I, however, feel like I can't move. I don't even unbuckle my seatbelt. My hands are locked on the steering wheel, and my knuckles turn white from the force of my grip.

"Ghost?" Evie's voice comes out concerned, and I hate myself for making her worry. I snap out of my trance and undo my seatbelt before undoing hers.

"I haven't been here in a very long time, it's just taking me a minute."

She nods and scans the building before turning to get comfortable. She sits back and gives me the time I need to process this.

After a few minutes, I blow out a breath and decide to face the music. I wanted to bring her here to show her part of me, and as much as I hate to relive this, I think I need it too. I walk around to open her door. She steps out gracefully, taking my hand in hers. I type in the code to get in the door and the moment I open it, the scent of paint and canvas greets me.

The lights are low and there is a small table with a white cloth and two chairs waiting for us in the center. Three canvases are lined up with cloth covering them, and I swear my throat dries up at the thought of uncovering them.

"I used to paint a lot," I tell her, bringing her into the room. I pull out the chair for her to sit. "When my mother died, I think something in me died too. My father turned cold. He resented me. That's why I started coloring my hair. I didn't want to look anymore like him than I already did. The tattoos followed soon after."

I pause, not wanting to think back on the first time I colored it. When I went to the store to buy color, nothing quite looked right. Then when I thought about bleaching it, that made sense because it made me think of my mother. About how when she dressed in white, she looked like the angel I knew she was. "I

tried to paint and remember the days we would sit in her study and she would teach me new brush strokes.”

I pop open the bottle of wine and pour her a glass. My hands have a slight tremble to them. She doesn't notice though, or at least she pretends not to.

“When she died, only one image would come to my mind when I dipped my brush into the acrylics. Her.” Tears prick at the backs of my eyes and my jaw tightens at the memory. “I used to spend all day painting with her, and when she died, I would spend all day in her study pretending she was there. I'd paint a different expression of hers so that I never forgot a single one.”

I laugh gently as another memory takes over my mind. “She used to scrunch up her nose when she laughed. It was like the sun shone in her eyes every time. When I would royally mess up a painting, she always found a way to make it something beautiful. She would create a tale for my pirate, one with a face that looked half-melted because I let too much water sit on my brush.”

Thinking about her like this again starts to make my heart feel lighter and gives me the courage to continue. “She would say that he betrayed his men in a deadly battle, and his face burned as his price to pay. She was very into drama and would act out the whole story for me, having me nearly falling off my stool with laughter. She refused to ever let me see myself as a failure.”

Talking about the way she would smile lifts my spirit, so I keep going, never once sitting or looking Evie in the eye. Instead, I focus on the covered portraits the entire time. I tell her about our secret way of communicating when my father was in a sour mood. How we would run into the studio in town and craft a project just for him and surprise him at dinner. It was one of the few times I ever remember my father smiling. My mother would tell tales in the evenings, and my father and I would sit on the couch, watching her in rapture.

Evie is quiet the whole time, listening intently to every word I share. She laughs along with me but never interrupts. She lets

me bask in the good memories. Eventually, the knot in my chest begins to ease, and I find the idea of looking at the paintings I chose feels less and less heartbreaking.

“So the reason I brought you here,” I clear my throat and stand as I gesture to the covered canvases, “is to introduce you to my mother.”

I turn to look at Evie. Tears touch her eyes just like they touch mine.

“I would love to meet her,” she says, standing and coming to my side. I thread my fingers through hers and walk up to the first display.

“A lot of my paintings were burned by my father, but these three are the best of what’s left. I picture her smiling when she gets to meet you. She always had a soft smile that made me feel at home when I was with her.”

I lift the cover and Evie gasps as the image of my mother looks back at us. “I was a realism artist, which is why I always took my failures so seriously. If they didn’t look real, then what was the point? My mother was the one to remind me that anyone can take a picture of something real, but only an artist can capture the essence of a moment and share its soul.”

And that’s what’s looking back at us now, the essence of joy and love from my mother.

“She would have loved you and the fight in you. She would have ached to capture your resiliency to stay in this world and put it on a canvas.”

A tear falls from Evie’s eye. I swipe it away, moving to the next one.

“This is how she would tell us stories. I picture her telling you of all the silly things I used to do as a child while we laugh, and my face turning red from embarrassment.” I uncover the next painting to reveal my mother in a pose, mocking a child-like run from when she would recount her sister chasing her after she painted a random object in her room.

“And finally,” I say as I move her to the last one. The hardest one for me to come face to face with, “I picture her looking down on us, watching as I make you mine and claim a sense of family I believed was lost forever.”

I reveal the final painting, the one of my mother as an angel. It’s much larger than the others and towers over us as if she really were looking down on us at this exact moment. Evie’s hand moves to her mouth as she takes it all in.

“She’s beautiful,” she says as she lets go of my arm and walks directly under her. I pull out my phone to snap a picture of this moment, never wanting to forget this.

The light behind the painting catches just right, and I swear my mother comes to life for the briefest of moments. For just a second, she’s here with us, smiling just as I remember her. My heart swells with both joy and sadness mixed together.

Evie turns back to me and runs into my arms, wrapping hers around my neck and holding me close as tears wet our cheeks in the silence.

After a minute, I break our embrace and look down at her. “So, Lucky Charm, would you have dinner with us?”

Her smile stretches across her face. It’s so beautiful I can’t help the twitch in my fingers with an urge to paint her. I haven’t painted a single thing since my father burned my mother’s images, but I’m finding so many moments I want to cement onto a canvas with Evie.

I have dinner delivered and Evie laughs when I pull out the giant sandwich. My mother loved sandwiches because she could eat them one handed while painting and there was a bakery she preferred to go to because the bread was perfect. We eat as I tell her more stories about my mother and my childhood.

“So you and your father are no longer close, I’m guessing?” she asks with her mouth half full of food.

I laugh at her assessment. “I don’t think my father has said a single nice thing to me since my mother died. I think he partially blames me. My mother was going to stay home with

me because I was sick, and she planned on missing her girls trip with Damien and Alexi's mothers."

I pick up the cheesecake, the very same one my mother would buy whenever we had guests. She would pretend she made it herself. "*It's our little secret,*" she would say as she carefully removed it from the pan and placed it on our own.

"Every year, they would all pick a destination and go for two weeks to reset and relax. The boys and I would normally stay at one of our houses during that time along with a nanny since our fathers worked so much. They would usually all spend one day with us though, and take us to do something fun."

I think back to how things used to be before Damien's father changed and grimace. He was never a doting father, but he would always look at Damien with a sense of pride. Now all his gaze holds for anyone is malice.

"For some reason, things with Damien's dad started getting worse. The year before they were in the accident, it was like he no longer paid attention to any of us. I told my mother to go on her trip and not to worry about me. It was only a small cold and would be over in a few days. I didn't want her to miss out on her time. So, I convinced her to go at the last minute. She called Alexi's mother and they changed their plans to come pick her up before heading to the airfield. She was so excited when she left the house that she forgot to tell my father goodbye."

I clear my throat and sit back, no longer interested in the meal. "He got the call when we were sitting on the couch together. I was eating a bowl of hot soup. When his face dropped, I knew something had happened. But the venom he shot at me while spilling the burning liquid down my body still haunts me some nights. He said it was my fault."

"Do you believe that?"

"Yes and no." I rub the back of my neck not knowing how to explain, but Evie finds the words for me.

“I get that. For the longest time after my parents died, I believed it was my fault. Sometimes I find myself falling into that trap again. Dr. K actually helped me see that their choices were their own. I know they were just trying to protect me. But, if they had only been honest with me from the beginning, so much would be different.”

I look back at the painting of my mother smiling, and it warms my heart as much as it breaks it.

“Our fathers had a joint funeral,” I tell her. “I don’t know if it was for them or for us, but there was no way any of us would have survived three different days of that kind of sorrow. Yet, seeing them all three together, their coffins sealed because the wreck was so bad, it made me feel like my mother was less special in that moment.”

Reaching out, I take Evie’s hand in mine, trying not to let the grief overwhelm me.

“She deserved to be mourned as an individual, not as a part of a group that the three of them had no choice but to form. Our fathers all kept them on the outside, and the only way they seemed to be okay with that was because they found their own thing between each other.”

I clear my throat, and she squeezes my hand. “I think seeing them up there together like that, it felt like our fathers were claiming them as a group that I don’t think they ever would have chosen to be in, given the choice. Our mothers were all strong, they were all their own people. They could have given so much to the Bratva and made it considerably better.”

I think back on the words I said to Boris after I heard what he said to Alexi in Evie’s hospital room.

“I never want it to be like that with us, so if you find us pushing you out, I want you to tell me. You’re a part of whatever we do, whoever we become. Do you understand? Can you do that for me?”

My voice nearly breaks, but Evie looks down at her plate with a smile dancing on her lips that confuses me. I can tell

when she speaks she's trying not to laugh, and it breaks some of the tension in the room.

"From everything you told me, I think your mother was an amazing person, but I'm not her. You don't have to worry about me feeling pushed out because if I ever do, I'll push harder. I won't need to find my own thing outside of what we do because it will be mine just as much as it is yours."

Her face turns serious as she looks up at me. "I'm not afraid of you, and I never plan to let you be in a position of power over me. If we aren't *all* equals, then there is no us."

The fire that burns in her eyes, the intensity of those words, shows me how serious she is. My fears of her getting left behind have no ground because she won't let herself be tossed aside. I should know better than to worry about her place among us. While she might see it as us all being equals, the truth is, she owns us.

She owns our souls; Damien's monster, Alexi's demon, and my heart. She's the queen we never knew we needed, and one I don't know if we could ever manage to live without.

"Do you want to paint with me?" I don't even realize the words are out of my mouth until after I've said them. My face freezes in shock.

"I um, I don't know how to paint," she says shyly.

"I'll show you." A grin stretches over my lips as I get to my feet, moving over to a box with old paints and hoping a few were sealed well enough that they are still usable. I move to the other side of the room, laying down a cloth and setting up an easel with a large canvas.

Getting out the few paints that haven't totally dried out, I squeeze them onto a palette. I grab a few brushes and bring back water and towels from the bathroom.

I look at the makeshift studio space with an odd feeling in my heart. The last thing I ever painted was my mother, and I never imagined I would paint again when I stocked all of these things in here. Evie's hand slides into my own, and when her fingers thread between mine, a sense of rightness fills me. I

kiss the top of her head and lead her to sit on the stool in front of the canvas.

“What do you want to make?” Her eyes widen as she looks at me.

“Lev, I’d be lucky to draw a heart that’s even on each side.” I laugh, a full laugh that lights me up from head to toe, and Evie chuckles with me.

“Art doesn’t have to be even. Paint what you feel, Lucky Charm.”

She eyes the blank space before her. She considers the few colors I was able to provide and without instruction she begins dipping her brush in the black. She covers the whole canvas in it, not a white spot left, and then she sits back. I grab another stool and sit to watch her as she looks at the other colors left. She rinses the brush then picks up a much thinner one and dips her paint in the yellow.

For over an hour she works, and I watch how seriously she considers each movement. Her face pinches when something isn’t quite right, then lights up again as a new idea starts to spark. I think about my mother being here, watching her, guiding her hand, showing her all the beautiful things she can create with just a small amount of paint.

I’ve never been a teacher though. So I just watch as her feelings come to life in an abstract and blurry mess of colors.

When she puts the brush down to look back at me, I find I don’t have to force the expression on my face; what she made is truly beautiful.

“What do you think?” She sounds breathless like she just ran a marathon.

“I think you are perfection personified, and I’m never going to let you go.” I stand up and wrap my arms around her as I take in the piece and her.

She has paint smudged on her dress, her face, some of it even stuck in her hair. But as I look at her, I’m in awe of the likeness she holds to my mother. My mother always had this softness about her brush strokes, but Evie’s are so strong and

precise that they hold the power of her strength in each one. She didn't second guess her movements. Evie did what I told her to do—she put her heart on a canvas for the world to see.

The black background makes you feel as if you're in a tunnel with a swirl of white and yellow in the center bringing you light. Strokes of red bleed into the black, some clearly seen and others seeming to hide between the layers of strokes of gray. At the center, where she brought the white in, three black hearts sit inside. One is bigger than the others. The one to the left is a little gray, and the one to the bottom has a small clover inside of it.

“This is how you feel?” I keep my eyes pinned to the canvas as I turn her in my arms to look back at her painting.

“You're all my light in the darkness, Ghost. You've each given me back a piece of myself I never thought I'd get to feel again. There's still darkness, wounds that don't know how to heal and others buried too deep to see, but there's light too. The last words my mother ever said to me...”

Her voice breaks off, and I know the rarity of her talking about them. I can't imagine how she must feel. I squeeze her close to me. With her back pressed tightly to my front, I give her all of the support I can.

“The last thing she told me was not to be afraid of the dark, that darkness can be a friend to those who learn to harness its power. Sometimes, I think that I've been in the dark so long I wouldn't know what light is anymore.” She shakes her head as if she's trying to clear a bad feeling, and I hold her even tighter, lending her my strength in the only way I know how.

“But then Damien makes me laugh in a way that makes my toes curl and my heart hum. Alexi looks at me like he'd dive in front of a bullet, catch it in midair, and throw it back at my attacker out of sheer will alone. Or you touch me in a way that makes me feel like I'm the center of your universe, and that's when I see the light again.”

I smile knowing that I can do that—knowing we all have the ability to do that for her. She may think she's in the dark, but she's our light just as much as we are hers.

“You don’t have to leave the darkness to find the light, it’s in there with me. The power is in finding each other and holding on like our lives depend on it because...” she turns in my hold, “I think they just might.”

Our lips meet and I give her all the light left inside me. My fingers dig into her waist as hers go around my neck. Our tongues tangle together and I swear she’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted. Her warm body is pressed so firmly to mine that it feels like we are the same, one entity coming together. The collision of two stars.

“Lev,” she pants between kisses, “I love you.”

I grab her ass so tight I hope she bruises. I pick her up, forcing her legs to wrap around me. Her dress bunches around her waist and I already know my girl is bare for me.

“I love you too, baby,” I say as I free my cock from my pants. She tries to wiggle down on me, rushing the moment. I hold her up with my one hand firmly gripping her ass.

“Patience, Lucky Charm,” I say as I walk her back to a wall. “I had to listen to you screaming for Alexi for hours. Now I want to hear you scream *just for me.*”

Her eyes are hooded as she nods her agreement, staying still while I step out of my pants and kick them to the side. My forearm presses to the wall above her head as I push her against it. Her back arches and her perfect nipples pebble through her thin dress. I lick my lips as I stare at her, holding us both in suspense.

Then, without any warning, I pull her tight pussy down on my cock. She gasps, then groans, letting out a sound of pure sin that I drink in greedily. She’s so slick and wet for me, taking my cock just right. When she clenches around me, it moves my piercing in a way that my knees threaten to buckle.

She grins at me like she knows exactly what she’s doing, so I strip her dress off of her as I move us over to the cloth I had laid out. There’s paint all over it, and I find myself not caring in the least. I keep myself fully seated inside her as I kneel

down and lay her out, then sit up and grab a brush, dipping it in a bright red.

She watches me as I stare at her. I let the brush graze her nipples, and she stays still for me as they harden into even tighter peaks. Moving to her neck, I feel the cold paint clinging to her skin causing goosebumps to erupt all over. The noise she lets out with the sensation has me salivating for her. She's a perfect canvas, her scars lighting up the edges as I paint her chest, her neck, and her arms.

She starts to pant under me, and I'm not even moving inside of her yet. The pleasure is purely from my brush strokes, and I'm addicted. My first time painting in so long begins to feel euphoric using her as my canvas. She rolls her hips, building friction between us. I toss the brush to the side only to trail my fingers through the wet paint that covers her. The colors blend together in a way that reminds me of the family we've created.

I pinch her nipple and rock my hips. Her lust-filled eyes darken until I could swear they are completely black. The bottomless pit of need she has for us makes me believe she was made for the three of us. Just as we were made for her.

"How's that feel, Lucky Charm?" I grind my pelvis into her clit. "Do you like being my canvas?"

"Fuck," she nearly screams. She looks down, watching where my cock is sliding in and out of her, then her fingers trail up into the paint too, finding mine and threading them together.

"I almost can't see the scars anymore," she whispers, and I kiss her.

"The only thing I see is you, Lucky Charm, and you're fucking perfect. Look at what you do to me." Pulling my cock out, we look down to see it glistening with her juices. The sight has me biting my lip. Her hand moves down and grazes over my piercing causing me to groan.

"You make me crazy, Lucky Charm." No longer able to control the animal within me, I slam back into her dripping

heat and grind my hips down.

Her back arches and our moans fill the air around us. Her hands go to my hair and she pulls me to her. Our mouths crash together as we both freefall into oblivion, riding out the wave while basking in the heat of each other's mouths.

I kiss her even after I'm soft and my cock is spent; I leave it in there just to make sure she knows I'm ruined for anyone else.

It's her. It's only ever been her.



We lay there coated in paint as it starts to dry and flake, our limbs are tangled together as my fingers sweep through her hair. All the nerves I had about coming back here are gone, and I find myself enjoying the peace of the present more than I have in a long time.

Eventually, we separate, and I help her get her dress back on. Although, I'm sure it's ruined now. I hunt down my clothes and pull them on, then carefully cover up the pictures of my mother so dust won't settle on them. I turn off the lights and head to the door. Pausing, I turn back to Evie to see her saying goodbye to my mother. It's such a simple gesture, but the seriousness of it solidifies that she's the one for me.

I pretend I didn't notice and try not to let the tears fall as I help her into the car and shut her door. When I walk over to my side I pause, taking a moment to look at the building that harbored so many feelings for me. Then, I wave goodbye to my mother for the first time in years. I get into the car and thread Evie's fingers with mine.

"Thank you," she says just as we pull into the garage. "That was one of the first real dates I've ever been on, and it was perfect."

I squeeze her hand. "Thank you for giving me a reason to go back there. I haven't seen those paintings in almost eight years. Without you, I'm not sure I ever would have gone back."



Chapter 26

I wake up on Christmas day to a knock at my door. Checking the clock, I find it's only six in the morning. There is no way the festivities are starting this early. I unlock the door and open it to find Havoc standing there.

"I'm not training on a holiday!" I nearly shout.

Who does he think I am? I don't wake up before nine in the morning, and I sure as heck do not work out on *holidays*. I've only just started training here because I needed to catch up to the rest of them.

Havoc smirks at me then pulls a bright pink box with a glitter rainbow bow on the top from behind his back. "I'm about to leave for part of my initiation. Boris didn't give me much choice. I've already said goodbye to Evie, and I'll be

coming back to the island to help train soon, but I wanted to give you this.”

He hands me the box as I stare at him in shock, my sleep-addled brain not catching up to his words. Slowly, I take it from him.

“I know we were supposed to guess,” he says, leaning into my door frame. “But I wanted to see your face when you opened it.”

I grab his arm and pull him into my room, moving to sit on the bed with my legs pulled under me as I undo the ribbon, not wanting to ruin it. I grin as I see the name it’s addressed to.

Unicorn is written in a poor attempt at swirly letters. He calls me that a lot, and I’ve found I really like the nickname. We’ve gotten fairly close during our training, and I love having his attention. There’s something about the strongest, fiercest man in the room looking at you like you’re the only girl in the world that gives me butterflies.

I carefully open the box and a bright pink crop top sits inside. ‘Only badass assassins wear pink’ is written across the front along with a gold necklace that has a unicorn charm hanging from it.

Havoc moves beside the bed and I launch myself into his arms.

“It’s perfect,” I say while giggling like a schoolgirl.

His arms wrap around me and a sense of rightness fills my chest, up until the moment his lips crash to mine. I’m stunned, confused, and even though I kiss him back, I don’t know why I do it.

We pull away from each other, and the corner of his mouth tilts up.

“Had to have at least one kiss before I left. You never know when a day in the mafia could be your last.”

My mouth falls open but no words come out. *Nothing*. I stare at him with a mixture of shock and longing. I thought I

was Arrow's girl, but more and more during this trip, I find myself wanting to be Havoc's too.

He helps me to my feet and kisses the top of my head affectionately. Still, I'm speechless. *Me*. This does not happen. *What in the hobgoblin is going on right now?*

"See you soon, my Unicorn," he says as he closes the door behind him. My fingers come up to touch my lips...where he kissed me. They feel numb, yet full. Like the memory of that kiss is still there pressing into them. I find myself not wanting to move or break the trance I'm in.

Then, I remember the present I have sitting under my bed and all thoughts go out the window as I snatch it and run down to the giant Christmas tree at the center of the house. I start grabbing pillows and blankets and create a setup for all of us.

I make some coffee in the kitchen, bringing with me a tray carrying an extra pot and a giant carton of creamer over to the couches. By the time I settle down into a spot and get the first sip, I hear Evie coming down the stairs with Damien.

"Just because you can't sleep doesn't mean I'm ready to get out of bed, Little Shadow."

I hear a soft thud like she hit him in the chest just before they come around the corner.

"I'm ready to enjoy today, plus I smell coffee."

"If it's coffee you need, next time I'll make you a cup to sip in bed while I tuck under the covers between your legs and make you come so..."

"Nope!" I shout to announce my presence. Evie gasps, but Damien stands there with his arm around her shoulders and mouth right up against her ear smirking at me like he already knew I was here.

"Sorry," Evie says with a blush, and I shake my head at them.

Eventually, everyone filters downstairs and we all sip on coffee and share stories about the holiday. I tell them about how my parents made Christmas a huge deal. We always had a

giant live tree. In the evenings we would take our leftovers to the shelter and help feed the homeless.

Lev talks about a Christmas with his mother when his father was out of town, and they both sat and painted the entire day together while munching on all their favorite snacks with Christmas movies playing in the background.

Evie opens up about her father and how he would hide a big gift that she had to hunt down every year. One year, she walked into her room with the final clue and found a horse in there. We all crack up laughing when she tells us it was on the third floor and how he had to have someone help them bring the horse down.

Boris joins us eventually, and while there's tension in the air, he tries his best to lighten it. I can see he's trying, so I give him a grateful smile when he passes us all gifts and lets us know he ordered something for Nessa as well. He videos her in so she can unwrap with us.

We all open our gifts to find bracelets in them.

Boris clears his throat. "I know you all are ready to set up this trap that will likely go down in history as one of the best trials to ever occur for The Society, but that also comes with a level of danger. These bracelets all have military-grade trackers inside of them. They are undetectable and work so long as you're above ground. It's the best thing I was able to offer you. I know I can't play a large part in this, but at the very least I can offer you a small measure of safety if anything were to happen."

His words are so gentle. I think the whole room is stunned. Although, not as stunned as we all are when Evie walks over to Boris and hugs him. I swear Alexi's jaw actually touches the floor.

It took her nearly a month of me being her best freaking friend before she ever hugged me, and even then it was out of sadness, so what the actual heck?

I put my jealousy aside as I watch the men in the room melt into a puddle of freaking glitter glue at the sight of Evie letting

down her guard. This girl has walls upon walls. The fact that this man was able to earn a place in her heart at all, much less a freaking hug, is a miracle only parallel to that of the resurrection of Christ.

I guess I'll just have to learn that we can widen our little family circle a smidge. But just this one time.

We decide to exchange our shirts next. Evie declares we'll open them one at a time, and when all of them are revealed, we get one guess who it's from. Nessa goes first because she needs to go on her run soon.

It's a black/gray shirt that says 'from the bottom of my heart' with a large heart on the front, but she moves it closer to the camera at the same time she lets out a bark of laughter. We all lean in to read, and in the bottom of the heart, it says 'fuck you'.

We all laugh. I'm next, and I show them all the shirt Havoc got me. Evie grins at me like she knows something I don't, and I can't help but wonder if she helped Havoc pick it out.

Evie goes next. The moment her eyes land on the heather gray shirt she starts cracking up and punches Lev next to her. 'Death by pineapple pizza' is written across the front with a giant slice of pineapple pizza. Lev smirks but doesn't give anything away as he moves to open his. He pulls out a navy blue shirt that says 'hack me if you can'.

The laughter we share during this exchange is something I've never felt, even when I was surrounded by my family. It's something so pure and genuine. I look around to see the faces of the family I chose for myself, tears burning the backs of my eyes because it reminds me that so much of my heart is still missing from this day. I haven't talked to my family in a while now, and I miss them dearly.

I clear my throat to distract myself from the tears just as Alexi opens his shirt. His face pales slightly before he holds it up and he locks eyes with Evie who is already giggling like a schoolgirl, totally giving herself away. 'DADDY' is written in large block letters across the shirt. Alexi takes a moment to examine the material in what feels like a very particular way.

He only tips a smile once he seems to find what he's looking for.

Boris goes next, and the smile that screws up his face seems rare based on the way Alexi openly gapes at him. '#1 Mafia Boss' is written on a cutoff gym tank. Boris stands up to model it, holding it up to his chest and pretending to flex for us. Evie literally rolls over in laughter, nearly falling off the couch.

"Since Havoc isn't here, I took a picture of the shirt I got him," Alexi says and passes his phone around to show us a picture of Havoc holding up his shirt that reads 'feeling stabby' on it with some throwing blades around it like a border. Evie lights up when she sees it.

"That's actually perfect for him," Evie says, handing Alexi back his phone. He seems to glow under her praise. He takes his phone back before lifting Evie into his arms and sitting in her spot with her on his lap.

"You're last," Alexi calls to Damien. Damien makes a show of unwrapping his box and glitter falls out as he pulls the shirt up to his chest. It takes a moment for everyone to read what it says, but I already know because I had it specifically made just for him.

'All you need is pain, lust, and a little bit of bitchy dust' is written in swirly letters on a bright pink shirt. At the bottom, there's a small pouch of glitter he can open and sprinkle others with. I wanted us to make an entrance when we came back, and I feel like we have all moved past this fear-based ruling. People need to know that they can come to their leaders, and the Kings need a way to bridge the gap. I have a strong feeling Damien will do just that.

After everyone composes themselves and Damien has dumped half the glitter on us, we begin the guessing game. Damien guesses me right away. I tell them Havoc brought me mine before he left. Alexi guesses Evie and kisses her for way too long while she whispers in his ear something I am very sure my ears do not need to ever hear.

As we go around the room: Nessa admits to having Lev, Boris confirms Nessa, and Damien had Boris' name. Evie clearly knew Lev got hers. And she's refusing to wear it on the first day while we all remind her she has to.

I've never seen Evie smile like this before. All of the posturing and needing to be the strongest person in the room isn't sitting at the surface. It's just a girl with her family, having the Christmas she deserves.

As things die down and the guys begin cleaning up, Evie comes to sit by me as we drink a fresh cup of coffee.

"This was perfect," Evie says, and I lean close to her.

"It really was."

"Sooooo," she says, side eyeing me. "Havoc came to see you this morning?"

Did he tell her he planned to kiss me?

"Yup," I say with a shrug, not willing to say much more yet because I don't understand it.

It's all a mess, really. I mean, I may have some feelings for Havoc, but I didn't know he felt anything back for me. The gifts and cuddles have just been like a friend, right? I don't know. Alexi said these men were in love with me. I thought it was just to rattle me, but now I'm starting to think maybe the jerk had a point.

I see how Evie is with her guys and they all seem to click, but I don't think it can be that way for me. Havoc and Arrow don't seem like they could come to terms with sharing, and I know in the end I'll have to break part of my heart by choosing. I don't want to say that out loud yet though. It makes the pain too real.

Training with Havoc and getting to see how gentle and sweet he can be with me has been the reset I really needed to get my head back in the game. I craved for someone to believe in me and teach me to be better without judgment. I needed someone who believed I was strong and forced me to see that side of myself. Arrow always wants to protect me, to throw himself in front of me. But Havoc understands that I'm not

someone to sit in the background during it all. I may not like the blood, but that doesn't mean I want to be left out of the loop because of danger.

My phone buzzes in my plush pink robe. I pull it out to find a text from Arrow, only furthering my confusion.

Arrow: Merry Christmas, baby girl, I'll give you your gift when you get back. I can't wait to see you.

I want to reply but hesitate long enough that Evie leans over and reads the message.

"It's okay, you know," she says, nudging my arm. I pocket my phone without responding.

"What's okay?" I ask, playing the oblivious girl I so often resort to.

"To like both of them."

She says it with such finality, like that's just how it is, and all is still right with the world while my heart rips itself into two pieces for two different men. Two different men that are way too old for me.

Evie tilts her head towards her guys who have started a wrapping paper war that closely mimics a snowball fight. "They never made me pick because I think they knew I couldn't. Maybe it can be like that for you too."

She leaves it at that, and I'm left wondering, hoping, and using my Christmas wish to ask for that to be true. Because if they make me choose, I might just have to choose myself instead.



Chapter 27

Christmas in Ireland is supposed to be a dream. Growing up, I remember when the winter solstice would come around and my mother and I would shop for our family. There was so much joy to be seen and so much life to appreciate.

I would have cocoa and sit on the back porch by the fire with my dearest friend Cillian. We would joke and cuddle under the same blanket for warmth. He was my first love—and likely my last.

The summer after I turned eighteen, my father tried to arrange our marriage, doing his best to give me what I wanted. Cillian and I had been in love since we were eight years old. When his father said no to my family's proposal, they ran to tell Cillian they wanted a better life for him than a mafia

princess. The very next year, his parents were found and killed by my father's people. You didn't say no to my father.

So when he arranged a new marriage for me, one with a man much older than I am, I wasn't allowed to say no either. I came to Elysium to prove to him I could climb the ranks on my own and rule without a partner. When word got to my father about the ease of Evie taking me down, he officially signed the papers that would make me Ronan O'Brien's wife on the day I graduated.

Little does he know, I don't plan to graduate. I won't hurt Evie's mission in any way, but I do plan to fake my death and get away from my father along with the serial killer he gave me over to. I had planned to tell Evie, but I don't want anything coming back to her.

It's why I'm paying close attention and learning all that I can from Boris. It's not to learn about his organization, it's to learn to stay hidden from someone as powerful as he is. I pick up my phone as it rings from the nightstand, pulling me from my wandering thoughts.

packages at your door

I didn't order any packages.

Anger rises in me at the idea of my father sending me something. I had told him I didn't plan to come home during the break because I needed time to catch up with the advanced long range shooting lessons I missed out on while I fell ill. Aka, my time being held as a prisoner.

I set the tracker beside the bed, so it doesn't register Evie going on a run, while I head over to my old room for the packages. I swear that girl runs more than anyone I've ever known. At least this gives me a little break from the routine.

When I get to my door, over twenty packages greet me in all different shapes and sizes. The courier must have given me someone else's packages because there is no way this is for me. My father never wastes time on pretty notes or intricate wrapping. He hardly even knows what I like anymore since

refusing to have a relationship with me when Cillian's family publicly embarrassed him.

Nessa,

Since no one should be alone on the holiday, here's a few gifts to help keep you company.

B

Holy shit, did Boris get me all of these?

I look up and down the hall before pulling everything into the room, stacking it neatly on the coffee table and send him a picture.

Nessa: You didn't have to do this. It's too much.

Boris: It's not too much. You put your life on the line to protect my son and the woman he loves. Consider this a thank you and a Merry Christmas, Little Fox.

I blush, actually blush over the words of a man the same age as my father.

What is wrong with me?

Nessa: Well, thank you. And Merry Christmas to you too.

I set down my phone and decide to spoil myself for the day. I've been exhausted from running the search on the island for any leftover intruders at night while I keep Evie's tracker in her bed. Today, I think even Evie would take the time to relax.

I text Evie my plans for the day, just in case her uncle messages her. She responds with a thumbs up and a heart emoji. I'm going to assume Damien's got ahold of her phone.

After making some hot cocoa, I turn on some traditional Christmas music to set the mood. Then, I sit back and begin to peel away the intricate wrapping paper. Luxurious bubble baths, silk nightgowns, and a black Cartier bracelet with a small geometric fox in the center all have my heart swelling with a sense of fullness.

It isn't until I open the present marked as 'open last' that tears threaten to spill from my eyes.

Years ago, when my father actually cared about me and what I wanted for my life, he gave me the painting of a Celtic knot shield. It's one of the only things I have from him, and I keep it to remember that I was once very loved by him.

“The Celtic knot shield is said to be a sign of strength and protection. It was placed on battlefields to warn off the weak and to show that the people of the land held power. You, my sweet love, hold that same power in your veins.”

I can still hear his words in my mind, feel the cool breeze of the spring day, and smell the lilies in the air even now.

I lift the smooth metal of the 9mm Staccato CS out of the box. The body is matte black, but the handle is a bright red with a celtic shield knot engraved into it. A note sits to the side, and I have to blink back the moisture from my eyes. I will not cry while holding a weapon this fucking beautiful.

“For the little fox who embodies the bravery and power of the shield.”



Chapter 28

I finish curling the last strand of hair when Alexi steps into the room. He's in a suit as black as night and a red tie. There's a glimmer in his eye that makes me think he's up to something. Or he could just be taking in the appearance of my perfectly done hair and makeup as I stand in front of the mirror in nothing but a bra, satin red thong, and bright red heels.

"I was just coming to see if you were ready for dinner. We wanted to walk you down," Alexi says as he approaches me from behind.

His finger skims along my spine before trailing around my stomach where he flexes his hand and pulls me into him.

"But I think," he whispers into my ear, "you look ready to be fucked instead."

I lean my head back and melt into his arms.

“Is that so, Daddy?” He doesn’t miss the taunting in my voice.

He gives the exact reaction I was hoping for. Alexi’s hand shoots into my hair and pulls until I’m bent in half, then kisses me like a man starved. It’s a good thing Laney gave me her lip stain or else this man’s face would be holly berry red right now. Although, he doesn’t seem to care.

I moan into his mouth, followed by a squeak as he smacks my ass.

“Don’t taunt me, Princess.” His warning is hardly serious if the smile on his face is anything to go by, but I’m not keeping anyone waiting. I was told there would be steak at this event.

He lets go of my hair, and I grab the dress hanging on the mirror beside me. It’s a bright red satin and the back is open. A few months ago, there’s no way I would have chosen this. But as I was looking through the closet Alexi had fully stocked for me, I knew this one was perfect for the occasion. Based on the tie he’s wearing that is a perfect match to the color and fabric of my dress, I think he might have been thinking the same thing.

No one is really happy about the fact that Lev and Damien’s fathers are supposed to be joining us for Christmas dinner, but Boris said it was something he really wanted.

As much as I’m coming around to Alexi’s father, he’s completely oblivious to all the shit these boys have been through because of those men. I don’t know yet if he just doesn’t want to believe it, or if something else is going on. As soon as we take down my uncle, I plan to have a heated conversation with the man about the two hands of the Bratva.

For now, though, I picked this dress for Damien. About an hour ago, he mentally shut down, and I don’t want to sit through dinner with him like that. I pull the dress over my head and it all falls into place perfectly. My back is so open that you can see the tip of my thong if I move just right, and I plan to move just right for my sunshine.

Lev's been keeping him company while I get ready, and now I can't wait to see their reactions. I do a quick check in the mirror and turn to leave, but Alexi is blocking the door. His hand grips the top of the frame, and there's a pained expression on his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Princess," he says in a strained voice. "I don't know how to tell you this."

My face falls as I approach him and unease pulls at my stomach.

What the actual fuck could be happening right now? Haven't we suffered enough?

"This suit... was not tailored correctly for me to be looking at you in that dress." He gets out as he bends over slightly.

I look at him in confusion before I burst out laughing. That asshole scared the shit out of me. I punch him in the shoulder as I move him aside, walking out to find my other men waiting for me in my room. Damien's jaw goes slack while a hint of joy brightens his eyes. Lev just looks frozen.

"What do you think?" I give them all a spin and make sure to move my ass just right so they get a glimpse of what's underneath. Considering I never wear any lingerie, it's probably even more of a shock for them.

"Little Shadow," Damien growls, stalking towards me.

"Oh no you don't." I throw my hands up to cover my face.

"No touching until after dinner. Laney spent forty minutes on all of this." I gesture to my face. "You're not ruining it before everyone gets to see it."

My little rant does nothing to sway the man. He walks right up to me, shoves my body back against the wall, and crashes his lips to mine. I swear these men make my head spin in ways I didn't even know was possible.

I let my hand trail down his side, then his abs and lower. I rub him over his pants as he tries to push into me. But before he can, I cup his balls and give them a tight squeeze. He sucks

in a sharp breath and pulls back until our lips are just an inch apart.

“I’m going to get you for that,” he says, but I only smile at him.

Pushing him back, he lets me move him. I pat him on the shoulder before walking over and taking Lev’s hand since he’s the only one not going all caveman on me. He presses a gentlemanly kiss to my cheek and I blush under his touch.

They all look like they want to say something but are holding back. My stomach growls so I get us back to the task at hand and tug Lev out of the room.

“You can punish me *after* dinner,” I offer Damien, flipping my hair over my shoulder. I finally know my way around so I’m able to take the lead as we head to the dining room.

Alexi comes to my other side while Damien trails us from behind, just like the monster I know he is. It sends a chill down my spine, and for the first time *ever*, I think about skipping a meal just to have them all to myself right now.

No, Evie, get your shit together. You’re hungry, and no one likes it when you get hangry.

I chastise my vagina into submission just before we turn into the dining room. A dark-haired man looking worse for wear in his tattered suit is at the table having a hushed conversation with Boris. Laney walks in just behind us and looks at the guys and then to me before walking to the table and pretending as if everything is normal.

The man turns to look at me and a knot lodges in my throat. His eyes and face are so familiar, yet so different. He looks so much like Lev that it almost takes my breath away.

“Father,” Lev greets him as he pulls the chair out for me. Lev sits between his father and me while Alexi takes up the head, at the opposite end of his father, leaving Damien sitting next to Laney across from me.

“Don’t you ‘father’ me you little shit, who’s the girl?” Lev stiffens in his movements and ignores the man as he fixes his

tie. I take his hand in mine and squeeze it so he knows I'm here for him.

"Ivan was just telling me that he hasn't eaten yet today, and he can't wait to see what Alexi has asked the chef to prepare for us," Boris cuts in as an attempt to move the conversation away from Lev and me.

Lev nods but still refuses to look at his father, only making the bastard more angry. Ivan's hand shoots out and grabs Lev's wrist.

Before anyone else can react, I hook my leg over Lev's lap until I'm straddling him and holding a blade to Ivan's wrist. I had already prepared for something to happen tonight.

I can feel everyone's eyes on me, but Lev is the only one I look at.

"Take your hand off of him," I warn, pushing the blade into Ivan's wrist. He bares his teeth at me, and I finally look at the man who's hurting my Ghost.

"I will not ask again." My voice sounds calm while my tone holds the gravity of the situation. "You *will* remove your hand and behave through this dinner, or I will slice your wrist until you bleed out right here. We will enjoy our meal either way. It makes no difference to me if you sit here with your blood on the inside or outside of your body. Your choice."

His nostrils flare, and I take in the differences in the two men before me. While Lev's jaw is strong and sharp, Ivan's is gaunt as if he's not eaten well for years. His pale face almost looks gray, whereas Lev's cheeks are pink. I know my proximity is doing something for Lev because I can feel him getting hard under my core.

Apparently, my ghost enjoys seeing the violent side of me.

Ivan reluctantly drops Lev's hand. I stand up between the two of them, my blade in Ivan's face as he stares at me with no fear.

What an ignorant little man.

I press the steel against his cheek and keep pressing until a small cut appears. I glance at Boris, but he honestly looks like he expected all of this, so I keep going. I trail the blade back and make a cut across Ivan's face until he flinches under my touch. I see he gets the message when fear finally crosses his features.

"Touch him again, old man, and I'll carve up that face nice and pretty before slitting your wrists." I wipe the weapon on his suit jacket before flicking my eyes back to his. "Got it?"

His throat bobs as he stares at me and nods, no one coming to his rescue because he knows where he stands. He's a servant of the king, and no king comes to save trash.

I put the blade back in its sheath under my dress and take my seat. Looking up, I see Boris gesturing for the meal to be served. No comment on my threats to his right hand, so I grin widely at him.

"You're going to just let this whore order me around?" Ivan asks in a slurred, hushed tone. Boris tips his eyebrow at him while I see all of my guys stiffen. Even Laney looks ready to gut the bastard for calling me that.

"If you don't like it," I jump in, not needing anyone to defend me, "then leave. You're clearly drunk, and no one wants to face a man who can't handle his problems sober."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Damien shift in his seat, and I feel bad. Except, it's the truth and the reason he's fought so hard to stay sober.

"You little bitch," Ivan says as he lunges at me. My blade is in my hand, but Lev grabs him by the hair and smashes his face into the table before leaning over him.

"This is Evie. She's very important to me, even more important than you. You call her anything except her name again, and I'll kill you."

Ivan's eyes are wide, his face even paler as he takes in the scene. Alexi is up with a gun aimed at him, Damien is walking toward him like he plans to smash him with his fists.

"Alright everyone," Boris says as he stands.

I look at him, then at Laney, who looks like she's doing everything she can not to laugh at the whole situation while her hand is casually wrapped around her little cat shaped weapon.

"Ivan, I invited you here to spend time with your son on the holiday. You clearly have celebrated too hard and are in need of a reminder of your place. In this room, we are a family. If you piss them off, it's not my job to save your ass. Now go home and sleep it off. I expect to see you in my office tomorrow afternoon."

Lev reluctantly lets go of Ivan's hair but not without a firm shove. When his father stands to his full height, he sways a little and Boris snaps his fingers. Two people come from out of nowhere to assist Ivan as he hollers profanities at us as he exits. The moment he's gone, the tension in the room visibly decreases.

"I am sorry, Lev. I truly just wanted us to be able to spend time together as a family," Boris apologizes.

I'm not sure how he expected this to go, but I never saw it ending well. Honestly, this outcome is probably one of the best cases. However, I wouldn't have minded seeing the man bleed to death from my blade.

Maybe one day.

"It's alright, I've accepted that he's not part of my family anymore. At least not the one I've chosen for myself," Lev says while coming over to grab my hand. He sits down and everyone follows.

"Is my father planning on coming?" Damien asks.

"No, he said he had an important delivery he needed to ensure and some payments to check up on." Boris sips his whiskey but doesn't seem like he's really in the room with us anymore. I'm not sure if he's disappointed or pissed off at the moment.

I see the anxiety release from Damien with that news and conversations begin to flow between all of us. Boris eventually comes around and joins in. All too soon we are stuffed,

laughing, and celebrating just like I remember my family once did.

The food tasted amazing, my mouth still watering over just how good it was. I couldn't fit another bite inside of me if I tried. Boris dismisses himself, then Laney comes around the table to give me a hug.

"I plan to take a long bubble bath and maybe even video chat with Nessa about her day. Night girl." Laney squeezes me tight from behind and I squeeze her back.

"Night, Firecracker."

And now it's just the four of us.

"Sit with me, Princess?" Alexi asks, moving back to make room for me in his lap. His hand goes to my hair as he holds me, stroking gently. The silence in the room only grows though and I see Lev and Damien eyeing Alexi like they are trying to silently communicate something.

"Alright," I say, knowing they have been wanting to say something for a while now and my anxiety is through the roof over what it could be. "Please just say what you've been trying to say. I can't take the suspense any longer."

Damien lights up with a grin moving to my side and Lev chuckles.

"You're just now gonna call us out, huh?" Lev asks as he moves to sit on the other side of us. I shove him playfully.

"Yeah, I thought I'd give you guys a short break from the sass as part of my gift to you, but the timer has run out. Now I'm back."

They shake their heads, but their smiles tell me they love it. They adore the sass and everything that comes with it.

"Show her, Lev," Alexi encourages while he moves his hand to rub circles on my bare back. Lev pulls a piece of paper from his pocket.

"I've noticed you've been looking at tattoos lately and well, we came up with this for you. You can change it up however

you want but when you're ready, I'll tattoo it for you if you'd like."

He hands me a sketch and my breath catches. The focal point is a skull surrounded by smoke and shadows with a large crown on its head. Roses and geometric clovers surround it with three large throwing blades that make up the background. It's honestly amazing, and I find myself truly speechless.

"You don't have to get it as a tattoo if you don't want to," Lev hurries to say.

"We can turn it into digital art easily and put it in a frame," Damien offers, taking my silence as something it's not.

I look up at Alexi. He's smiling, knowing exactly what I'm thinking.

"You want it now, don't you, Princess?"

"Do you feel up to it now?" I ask Lev. He takes my hand in his.

"Anything for you." He kisses the back of my hand. "Let's set up in the marble room. Damien, grab the kit from my room. Alexi, get the room cleaned and ready for us. Our girl is gonna need snacks and *lots* of distractions."

Lev turns back to me, pulling me to my feet. I follow him while the other two go in the opposite direction.

"Where are we going?" I really want to change before we do this.

"You have to pick where you want it." Lev leads me into a computer room and back towards a printer with a laptop hooked to it. "Do you want to change anything with it?"

"Not a single thing. It's perfect."

"Great," he says with a grin, looking pleased with himself. I mean, he should be. The piece is fucking amazing. "I was thinking you could put it on your thigh." His fingers trace over my dress right where the three scars are and anxiety builds in me.

If I get it there, I won't be able to cut up my leg anymore. I haven't felt the urge to do it in a while, but that doesn't mean it will just go away. I don't want to cut into his art when I'm overly emotional or just trying to get through a panic attack. Yet, I do want these scars covered. I want to start replacing the bad with the good and stop focusing on the things I can't control.

"It's all your choice, Lucky Charm," he says in a whisper.

"I think...can you maybe try the stencil in a few other places first?" I don't want to chicken out, but maybe this will help me make the right decision.

He prints the stencil and we try it on my ribs first, but I don't like the way it molds with a lot of my scars. My back is the same way and my arm isn't really as much of an option because I want it to be a decent size so I can keep all the detail.

"Let's try it on my leg," I say finally, getting emotional and frustrated with the process.

He cleans off the other outlines then preps my leg. There's a pause before he lays it on my skin like he's looking for something specific. When the paper covers my scars, a single tear escapes me and I wipe it away before he can see. Slowly, he pulls the paper back. I walk up to the mirror to get a look with my dress bunched up around my stomach.

I see why he was applying the stencil so carefully now. Each point of a rose lines up with a scar perfectly. The shadows and smoke spill out to hide and reform the image of the marred skin. I have no doubt that when it's done, no one would know they were there unless I told them. It's perfect.

I don't even realize I'm crying until Lev comes up behind me and wipes my cheek with his thumb. Tilting my face up to his, he kisses me sweetly.

"It's okay if you're not ready yet." His arms wrap around me, and I suddenly feel like everything is going to be okay.

This feels right. I think it's time I let go of old habits and start embracing new ones. I know I don't need the cutting

anymore. It was a tool I used to bring me back to the present. But now I have three men ready to help me, and I trust them to do just that.

“I’m ready,” I breathe, looking down at the tattoo that somehow already makes me feel like so much more of a fighter than I ever pictured myself as.

I am Evie fucking James, and I’m ready to show the world exactly who that is.



The marble room is *insane*. It’s literally a whole ass room made of white marble streaked with light gray blemishes. Lev sets up his table in the middle of the room, and Alexi and Damien pull the couch and black fur rug to the side where they have snacks piled up high.

They each take turns holding my hand or coming over to feed me, even though I explained I was capable of moving my hands.

The pain isn’t too bad, but every once in a while, I feel like I want to punch Lev in the face. Damien catches the look in my eye and keeps me distracted.

Alexi doesn’t like the idea that I’m in pain. He offered me numbing cream, to which I told him he was a pussy and if I was dealing with it, then so would he. Now, any time I wince, he glares at me.

I have a strong feeling we will never stop butting heads, and I love it. He keeps life interesting for me. I like to challenge him because it makes me feel strong, but I also trust him to respect me when I say no.

“Sooo…” Damien drawls. I can see the look in his eyes, he wants to ask me something but is afraid he might offend me.

“Just spit it out, Sunshine.” I lay back and rub my eyes, preparing for his question.

“How was your session with Dr. K?”

That was not what I was expecting at all. I freeze with my fingers pressed to my eyes. I haven't talked about it with any of them really. I don't know if I even want to talk about it at all. That is, until I remember what Dr. K said.

Talking about our past is our brain's way of working through trauma. We talk and we remember. Then, I remind you that you're safe, and you have the control. It helps to remake the memory into something that, while still tragic, it doesn't get to control our present. It just takes time to master that skill.

"It was... good. I guess?" I don't really know how to answer him. It was good until it was bad, and now I'm scared to do it again because I don't like feeling that way.

"You can be honest. If you don't want to talk to her again you don't have to." Damien comes to stand by me and takes my hands away from my face, holding each one and kissing them.

"We've all been there. Fuck, half the time we still are. We won't judge you if you're not ready."

The gentleness of his tone has me zoned in on only him. His brown eyes sparkle back at me in a way that makes me believe his words in the depths of my soul.

"It's not that I don't want to talk to her again. It's more that...I wish I had something I could do that isn't just talking to someone."

I don't even know if that makes sense or if I'm grasping at straws here, but Damien has a way of seeing what I'm trying to say without me having to spell it all out for him. The tattoo gun stops buzzing, and I find Lev looking over at Alexi. It's clear there's still something they're keeping from me.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I nearly yell. "Spit it the fuck out. I'm not a child in need of coddling. What are you not telling me?"

Damien chuckles at my outburst, but I can see Lev and Alexi are still concerned.

"We wanted to talk to you about an idea Dr. K had," Alexi speaks up, finally.

“Okay, what idea?”

“There’s a way,” Lev begins, “to work on your trauma responses and the memories that doesn’t involve talking to Dr. K directly.”

“And that is?”

Damien answers this time. “Do you remember when you had that sub drop a few weeks ago?”

I nod, still not understanding what that has to do with therapy.

“Before that happened, did you feel like you were almost in a state of floating between universes?”

“Yeah, but I figured that was just the orgasm.”

Damien pinches his lips together, trying to hold back a smirk and doing an awful job at it. Alexi steps up to the side of the table and runs a hand down my other leg.

“That’s called the subspace. It creates a safe space for you in your mind when you give up control. It helps to create an environment where you can face more trauma at once because you’re more numb to it.”

He sits down next to me and takes my hand in his as he continues.

“Dr. K mentioned it could possibly help, but she has only attempted it a handful of times. However, because she’s been coaching me for three years in this world and Damien for just over a year, she feels confident we can help you through it. The only thing is, doing this requires a lot of trust and understanding. There is always a risk of a sub drop afterwards.”

Lev steps in then. “It’s not an idea to be taken lightly, and it’s not something we would ever do without your consent.”

My head spins with this information. The sub drop definitely didn’t feel good, but the way they helped bring me back to my body sort of did. I’m not saying I’m the kind of girl who relies on her men to bring her snacks and water and

sit in a bubble bath with her, but I sure as hell would never turn it down.

“Just think about it. Don’t make any rash decisions,” Lev says. “I need a quick break to use the restroom and get the colors poured, but it’s almost done. Why don’t you take a look while I’m gone.” He gives me a small peck on the lips before leaving the room.

There’s a full-length mirror on one wall. Damien helps me stand up to check out what sitting for the past three hours has earned me. Alexi brought me one of my older t-shirts that’s a bit too large, but also my favorite to sleep in. There’s a skeleton girl with a bun in her hair and a coffee in her hand that says ‘caffeinated to death’.

I approach the mirror and I’m instantly in love with the design. It’s just the outline with some shading, but I can already see how well it’s working with the scars. The detail is astounding.

“Well shit,” I breathe.

“He’s a fucking genius,” Damien says next to me.

“I think I like the ink on you, Princess.” Alexi’s hands wrap around my waist while he admires the tattoo in the mirror with me.

“I think I’d let Lev cover my entire body if all of his designs are this perfect,” I say.

“They are,” Damien says. I study his tattoos. They range from color to black and white, some realism, others tribal, and a few that look like paintings.

“Did Lev do them all?” I ask Damien.

“Yup, well, all except this one.” He points to a tattoo behind his ear I never really noticed before. It’s a small sun that’s tucked in tight to his ear, almost blending with the other tattoos that cover his neck. “This is courtesy of the Sun’s Bratva.”

I swear I’ve seen that tattoo before, but I can’t place it. My thoughts on the matter disappear as Damien strips his shirt and

starts telling me about the piece on his back. It's a detailed collage of angels and demons and a battle they are having over a small jeweled box in the center.

"What's in the box?" I ask as he starts naming the angels and demons.

"My soul."

A sense of dawning hits me as I take in the art that covers him. Both the angels and demons look beautiful. If it weren't for the horns and halos, I would have no idea how to tell them apart. Their faces are all the picture of the word angelic, but the swords they hold and the power in their strikes speaks to the brutality on both sides.

Neither side is any closer to the box than the other, and the blood spilled all around them shows how vicious a battle it has become. It's something I can understand on so many levels. It's so fucking beautiful I could cry.

Damien can't see my reaction, but Alexi's grip gets tighter around me as I imagine the battle for my soul in my head. Except, I picture my box colored black, bathed in the tar of the sins others have forced upon me, and the sins I've freely committed myself.

Would any angels really want to fight for what's inside my box?

"I would fight off a thousand armies to be the keeper of your soul," Alexi whispers in my ear, just between us. I thread my fingers with the hand wrapped around me.

"And I would burn the world to be the keeper of yours," I tell him.

He chuckles low in my ear. "Sounds like we *are* pretty toxic."

I turn in his arms, careful not to brush my tattoo on his leg as I move.

"Or like we both know exactly what we want and aren't afraid to fight for it."

He tips my head up and plants a soft kiss on my lips just as Damien turns around.

“Did my ink make you that hot and bothered, Little Shadow?” He approaches me from behind, effectively sandwiching me between the both of them.

“You two horny fuckers better get your hands off our girl before you touch that tattoo or I’ll start throwing punches,” Lev says as he storms into the room. I’ve hardly ever seen him pissed off, but shit, he looks furious.

“It’s okay, Ghost,” I say, trying to joke with him while I move out from between Damien and Alexi.

He clenches his jaw, and I can’t help but feel like something else is going on.

“Are you okay?” I ask, but before I can reach out to him, he’s pulling me close and crushing our lips together.

When we separate, he gives me a stern look. “There are very few things I will ever get upset about, but don’t mess with my tattoos. Get that tight little ass back on my table so I can finish what I started.”

He slaps my ass just enough to sting and arouses me more than I already was while sandwiched between my other two guys. Cursing him under my breath, I get back on the table and he smirks at me. I consider messing with all of them and spreading my legs to play with myself right here, but I want this tattoo finished so I sit back like a good girl.

About an hour later, I speak up. Lev thinks it will only take him another hour to finish shading with the black and red, and I’ve been using this time to think.

“I want to try it.”

Damien and Alexi look at me from the couch, and even Lev pops his head up.

“Try what?” Damien asks.

“The subspace thing and…” I take a deep breath, knowing I need to say this out loud before I chicken out. “And I want to try talking to Dr. K again. Maybe we can just text for a while.

Talking out loud feels like too much right now. I just know that I want to stop being afraid of getting help.”

Alexi walks over, bending down so we are face to face. Lev squeezes my knee. Damien brushes my hair back, and the amount of love and support I feel is enough to make my heart implode.

“We will try it soon but not tonight. For now, I just want you to know I am proud of you,” Alexi says. He leans in and kisses my lips, then my cheek, then my forehead.

My face heats under his praise and attention. As much as I never wanted to be a girl who lets a man give her what she needs, I can’t help it if I found three who happen to do just that. I find myself content in not fighting it anymore as I look around at them. I can be fiercely strong and independent while being whole-heartedly in love.

They don’t leave my side while Lev finishes up. The pain turns into a numb-like feeling and I sink into it, starting to understand why people say these are addictive. That space between pain and pleasure morphs into a fog of just *feeling*. Nothing is good or bad, it just is. It’s almost... relaxing.

“I think she likes it,” Damien says. I smile with my eyes closed.

“I just need to add the highlights,” Lev says, not stopping his movements. “Then I’ll be finished.”

I let him complete his work in silence, the buzzing feeling almost soothing at this point. Damien plays with my hair, and my whole body seems to relax. Alexi stays standing by my side with my hand in his. A cooling sensation hits my thigh just before a towel wipes over the tender area.

“You ready to see it, Lucky Charm?”

I open my eyes and nod my head. The guys all help me get off the table without falling. When I look into the mirror, my heart stutters. The roses are a deep red surrounding a shadow skull, the crown is almost silver with red jewels and the blades look exactly like mine. As if all I would need to do is put my hand there and pick one up.

“Lev,” I breathe, unable to form any kind of sentence. He pushes in close behind me, his arm going around my waist to hold my back tight to his front.

“Do you love it?”

“It’s... perfect.” And it truly is. I have no other words because nothing else would do it justice.

When Laney did my nails, I had never really thought to look at things the way they could be perceived in art, but with this, I see it clear as day.

The skull is the death of my old life. The roses around it, along with the clovers, are what bring me the strength and endurance to overcome my past. The blades reflect my courage, while paying homage to my mothers favorite number and the reason why I always carry three. The crown represents who I am now, and who I choose to be for those I love. A leader, a fighter, a protector.

Having this as a symbol of everything I’ve been through is exactly what I needed. The constant reminder that I’m not alone—that I have people worth fighting for is enough to renew my spirit on any day that I might question who I am.

Damien and Alexi both kiss me before they leave, giving Lev and me a moment. I stare at the tattoo, then my eyes drift to his in the mirror. I feel like I’m seeing a new side to this man, and I’m loving him more and more each day.

Is that even possible? For love to grow every day?

It has to be, because as he pulls me close to him I can’t help but say, “I love you.”

And when he kisses me on the head and whispers it back, it feels like something even more than what we had yesterday.



Chapter 29

It's been a week since Lev tattooed Evie, and I feel like we've all been building up to something. We have become much closer, never once sleeping away from each other, and Evie has been doing better. We are able to help her through the night terrors that she still has by working together. Her eyes now hold a new lightness to them. Which is why I planned for it to happen today. She's ready.

I walk into one of the sitting rooms to find Evie curled up on the couch with a coffee, she and Laney are watching the snow fall outside the windows. It's beautiful. That backdrop with my girl and her smile in front. It's perfect, and I plan to do everything in my power to make sure that smile stays with her.

I lift an extra hoodie in my hands and without a word, she lets me put it on her. I help her to her feet and she presses a kiss to my lips, knowing exactly what I need without either of us having to ask.

“You guys have fun,” Laney says, dismissing herself and leaving in her pink robe and bunny slippers.

Neither of us speak as I take her hand in mine and guide her to the garage. She lets me help her onto the front of my bike, and I put her helmet on for her. Before we take off, I check our mics and ask, “Can you hear me, Princess?”

She nods. “Can you feel me?” I push my throbbing cock into her backside. Her only response is to wiggle back against me. A small laugh leaves my lips in response. *This girl.*

I take off, picking up speed as fast as I can before gliding us around the first turn and leaning until my knee is less than an inch from the ground. It’s enough to get a squeal of delight from my girl and I bathe in her happiness.

We ride for a bit, and when I can tell she’s starting to get cold, I head toward the cabin. We’re about a quarter of a mile away when I stop and park the bike in the trees.

“What’s going on?” she asks as she takes off her helmet, her silver hair sparkling in the dusk lighting.

“I wanted to try something with you.” I walk up to her, backing her into a tree.

“Do you trust me?” I whisper in her ear, making her bite her lip. “Do you want to play a game with Daddy?”

Before I can even finish the sentence, she’s nodding her head.

“Yes, sir.” Her hot breath skates across my flesh, and I can’t help the groan that escapes me.

“In that case,” I step back, giving her room to move and her brows lift in question. “Run.”

She laughs a little before she sees I’m serious. “Out here? Now? It’s freezing.”

“Then you better get to the cabin before I do, Princess, or I’m fucking you outside. In the snow.” I crowd her space again, just for a moment. Just long enough for us both to get a taste of what’s to come.

“I’ll give you a five second head start.” I push my body away from hers, knowing the rush of the adrenaline will be worth it, even if every ounce of my being wants to fuck her right here against that tree.

“One.” She takes off sprinting and I can feel my heart rate pick up before I even begin to chase after her. There’s something about hunting a person and capturing them for your own pleasure that can turn any man into a beast.

Evie claims to love our monsters and demons. Let’s see if that’s true when this is all over.



She’s smart, I’ll give her that. I should have known hunting a hunter would be a challenge. She took off running on the road and then darted into the woods at one point. The leaves along with the snow covering the ground aren’t enough to cover her tracks completely, but she knows what she’s doing. You can see where she’s backtracked after a second, trying to lead me into a dead end so she could get further ahead.

When her tracks stop in the center of a clearing, I’m sure she’s actually got me fooled. Then, I hear her. It’s soft, but my girl knows what she’s doing, and she knows what her Daddy likes.

I look up to see her in the tree behind me. She’s sitting on a lower thick branch with her legs spread and her hands in her pants.

“Wrong move, Princess,” I warn. “You don’t touch that pussy without Daddy’s permission.” I move to grab her when she lets out a soft moan, causing my hard dick to throb behind my pants.

“Do you want to be punished?” I ask her through clenched teeth. All she does is smile as she jumps down.

“Does Daddy want to punish me?” Fisting her hair in my hand, I tilt her head back. My tongue traces her neck, ending on her ear before I suck it into my mouth and bite down.

“Fuck,” she breathes, her knees growing weak under her.

I push her up against a tree and kiss her like a savage. My hands hold her hips as I rock my erection into her and she moans. I don't stop until she's panting heavily. Her breaths fog the air around us. I drop my hands to her ass and squeeze until I'm sure I've left my mark on her.

I release her, making her stumble back with a look of lust in her eyes. That's when I see it.

“What's that?” I point to the fabric falling out of the pocket of the hoodie she's wearing.

“Oh this?” she teases as she pulls out a red lace bra. “I was planning on leaving it hanging from a branch after I got away from you a second time.”

She takes off running again but this time, I'm right behind her. Before she can make it three steps, my arm wraps around her waist and my free hand collars her throat.

“What makes you think there will be a second time?”

I see her mouth lift into a smile a moment before pain shoots through my ribs. I let go of her as I attempt to catch my breath.

“Because I play dirty, *Daddy*.” She takes off again. This time, I'm not able to catch up to her. My adrenaline rushes through my veins and as I look down, ready for the hunt of a lifetime. I can feel it in my bones that this girl was made for me.



Chapter 30

What have I learned in the past fifteen minutes of being chased through the woods? Primal is *thrilling*.

The idea of being hunted and chased sounded so odd at first, but the thought of Alexi looking for me while I hide and try to get to the cabin first has me giddy with excitement. I wouldn't mind if he caught me and fucked me, but we both like to be rough, and it's even more fun when you add this extra level of suspense to it.

I toss my bra up, hooking it on a branch as I carefully backtrack my steps and take off in another direction. The cabin comes into view and I abandon the idea of being quiet, knowing that I'm ahead of him. There's no way he can catch me now.

My arms are pumping as I sprint the last thirty yards, my breath fanning out around me. I glance back to see if Alexi is there and suddenly a firm body steps into my path, causing my arms to flail. I almost faceplant before another set of hands catches me.

My eyes struggle to see who's in front of me because when Greek gods come to life, you aren't always expecting it. A shirtless Damien stands there, his hand wrapped around my arm while the other rests on my hip.

"Gotcha," he says before locking my wrists together and pushing my front against a tree. He breathes me in and I shiver in response.

"Good," I push my body against the tree and adjust my fingers to go for his balls, just like I did the first time he tried to restrain me. His knees buckle as he lets out a cough. I chuckle and begin to sprint back to the front door.

That man needs to learn to start guarding his jewels.

I should know better by now. This is three against one, and none of us fight fair. So when Lev's hand shoots out from the porch around the cabin, I shouldn't be as surprised as I am.

"Not so fast there, Lucky Charm." He sounds so menacing, in a playful way, and it's got me fucking soaked already. Two shadows move from the woods, stalking towards us. Lev locks my hands behind my back as he presents me to my monster and my demon. Their eyes are almost black with lust, their breaths coming in short pants.

"You should know better than to play dirty," Lev whispers in my ear, the heat of his breath causing goosebumps to travel down my neck.

"I like it dirty though." I bat my eyelashes at them, causing Alexi to chuckle.

"Well then, Princess, let us show you how dirty we can be."



Chapter 31

I drink in the sight of her being held back by Lev, her chest rising and falling in anticipation, sweat already on her brow. I can't help but take a moment to admire her. After I've traced every inch of her with my eyes, I take the knife from my back pocket and flick it open.

When I meet her eyes again, there's a new sense of hunger there. It's as if the cool metal of my blade calls to her. I approach her and run the sharp edge down her cheek. Not hard enough to cut but just enough to leave a pink line where it touches.

“Don't you know not to run from a predator, it only makes them want to chase you more.” My voice is cool, commanding, and hardly above a whisper.

“I’m not prey to be caught,” she says, her breasts rising with her chest and the outline of her nipple making it clear she abandoned her bra in these woods.

“You are tonight, Princess. Now tell me, are you going to play along, or does D need to get out his rope?”

Her eyes dart to Damien, but she corrects herself to look at me when she answers.

“Why don’t you let me go and find out.”

Her fucking mouth. I hate it as much as I love it.

I move the blade from her face to her neck, then slash it through the hoodie. Her gasp only spurs me on and in seconds, her clothes are falling off of her. Evie’s breath picks up as the light around us grows dim, the sun beginning to set. You can see the puff of air as it leaves her lips with the temperature this low, and as much as I want to stay out here, I also know this can’t go on too long with her being naked.

Her nipples pebble to tight buds instantly. Damien moves behind Lev to get a good show. I step toward her while Lev angles her so her back bends and her breasts are up in the air. I lean down and suck one into my mouth, my fingers circling and pinching the other. Just as she starts to moan and her hips rock on instinct, I bite down.

She cries out as her hips thrust up against me, but I’m not done punishing her for that elbow to the ribs. I move to the other one and do the same.

“Fuck. You,” she breathes once she’s done screaming for the second time. My fingers move to her core, pushing into her folds and finding her pussy soaked.

“That’s the idea, Princess,” I say as I shove two fingers in deep without warning.

Her back arches even more and she seals her lips closed, not letting those beautiful moans escape. I work my fingers harder, faster, giving her no choice but to part her mouth and give me what I want.

“Now be a good girl for Daddy and fix the attitude.” Fire flares in her eyes as she looks at me. Will she give up the fight so she can have the pleasure?

“No.”

The guys and I discussed this scene ahead of time. We are close and comfortable with each other to know what each of us wants. So when Evie tells me no and Lev lets her go, I know he’s doing it for me.

Before my little brat can run, I grab her arm and spin her around. Shoving her to her knees in front of me, I get a front row seat of her eyes dilating. She lets out a hiss of pain as she falls to the snow, but the look she gives me tells me to keep going. *My girl likes the pain.*

I fist her hair and get her on all fours before smacking her ass.

“Oh shit,” she yelps as I land a second and third smack. My hand rubs it for just a moment, prepping her for more pain.

“Do you like to push me? Do you want to see all the things I want to do to this beautiful ass in punishment? Do you want to wear my handprint for days?”

“Yes,” she says, her ass pushing into my hand, asking for more. My finger slides down the crack of her ass, and I push lightly on her tight hole. Her body tenses and I give her the chance to tell me no.

I move my finger then do it again, still just pushing lightly, then I smack her ass again, and again, and again.

She’s trembling now, her hands and feet in the snow mixed with the suspense is putting her on edge. And I love every fucking minute of it because here, I am in control. I push my pants down and free my cock as I line myself up with her soaked entrance. I pull her head up by her hair and offer her two of my fingers.

“Suck,” I demand and her mouth opens instantly. I move my fingers in and out at a punishing pace, just like I want to fuck her, then I press them all the way to the back of her throat. Her

lack of gag reflex is impressive, but I want her to choke on me.

Her mouth parts, drool slipping out as I finally get the reaction I want. She gags on my fingers. When I pull them free, they are coated in her saliva.

“Such a good fucking girl, aren’t you?” I croon. My girl nods. “You just need Daddy to remind you who you are, don’t you?”

I push into her then, not giving her a moment to speak because we both know the truth. Her heat surrounds my cock as her fingers grip for purchase in the snow, but I’m not holding back. Lev moves in front of her, pulling her hair in his hand and holding it back while she looks up at him.

“Does he feel good?” he asks her.

“So. Fucking. Good.” She is shaking around me, her walls gripping my dick like they never want me to leave. The sensation is nearly too much, but I’m not done here yet. I pull out, not ready to come, and she whimpers.

“Please,” she tries to beg, so I slide the tip in, teasing her. “Daddy, fuck me.”

I slam all the way home and slide my slick fingers into her ass. She clenches around me, trying to push me out when Damien comes to her side.

“Just relax for him,” Damien coaches her, moving his hand between her legs and rubbing her clit with his fingers.

After she relaxes a bit, his hand dips down. Suddenly an ice-cold feeling hits the base of my dick as Evie lets out a gasp. Damien winks at me as he presses the snow to Evie’s clit. His fingers brush my cock as it slides in and out of her. It all feels so fucking good, I know I’m not going to be able to hold out.

I wiggle my fingers in her ass and she explodes, her walls milking my dick and fingers for all they have to give as they both slide into her as deeply as they can. I follow along with her, spilling myself inside her and filling her up.

Neither Lev nor Damien seem to mind as Lev leans down to kiss her and Damien keeps rubbing her through her orgasm while trailing kisses down her shoulders and back.

Slowly, I pull out, making sure not to shock her too much. She tries to slump forward onto the ground, but Damien lifts her into his arms and we all walk into the cabin. Lev peels her pants off of her and tosses them to the side as we enter.

I, being the adult around here, pick them up and hang them nicely to dry. The fire is lit and the room is nice and warm. We will need to give Evie a few minutes to adjust before doing more with her.

Damien lays her on the bed and strips out of his pants before getting in beside her. His lips fuse to hers as Lev moves in behind her, already naked. Instead of going to clean up or leaving them to it, I decide I want to stay. I want more, and I want it with all of them.



Chapter 32

I can feel Alexi's eyes on us. My tongue slides into Evie's mouth and I take my time to savor her taste. Lev takes his time to suck on the curve of her neck, marking her. His hands trail up and down her body with mine as we warm her back up. The image of Alexi shoving her down to all fours in the snow has me painfully hard.

Lev's fingers trace up my arm. I break the kiss with Evie to kiss him. We're all tangled in a kiss, our tongues dancing in a three-way. I never knew it could feel this good.

My heart is thrashing in my chest at having the two of them like this. It's better than any high I've ever chased. I move Lev's hand to my cock, wanting him to stroke me while I play with our girl's nipples.

They're red and still cold so I warm them with my hands. Then, my mouth. I can't get enough. I want to suck every part of her into me, and while I know that's crazy and impossible, for now I'll just settle with her flesh. I leave my own marks on her, large ones on her breasts and chest, right next to where I marked her our first time. I want to make sure every time she looks in the mirror she can't forget who she belongs to.

My hand slips between her thighs. I feel the cum leaking out of there as I swirl my fingers in it then rim her entrance. She starts panting again, already needing more.

“You want to come on my fingers, baby?”

She nods so I work into her with ease. I start up a slow rhythm, keeping her on the edge. Her hips start to move in an attempt to chase her orgasm, but I stop her. “You don't come until we say so.”

Defeat flashes briefly in her eyes. I smirk back at her.

“Then you better make it good, Sunshine.”

“It's always good with me.” I kiss her then get out of the bed and pull out the rope I brought along with a few other things: a vibrating butt plug, a whip, and some nipple clamps.

Lev moves her so she's in the center of the bed and Alexi sits in the chair next to us. He's fully stripped and already hard again. We've never all shared a girl like this. I don't want anyone to be uncomfortable. I wait until we make eye contact and raise a brow in question. He nods at me in approval to keep going, so I do.

I hand Lev the rope, having taught him simple hand restraints while I put the scissors by Alexi, knowing he will take control and cut them if he sees anything is off. Lev ties her arms spread out and I tie her ankles the same. She's squirming, no doubt nice and warm for us now.

“What's your safe word, Little Shadow?”

“Vanilla.”

“And what's your warning word?” I ask, needing to know she's really read everything.

A grin splits her face. “Chocolate.”

“Are you ready to play?” I step slightly to the side, making sure she can see all the toys and give consent to everything first. She eyes the butt plug for a few seconds as if contemplating if she’s really ready.

“I want to go slow with butt stuff,” she says, trying to turn her head like she’s embarrassed.

She’s naked, tied to four points of the bed, her ass bright red, and her pussy leaking cum; but somehow she’s embarrassed to tell us her limits. I walk up to the side of the bed and move in close.

“You don’t have to try it now. We can wait. I need you to be honest. Is this a limit?”

She bites her lip. “Evie,” I pinch her chin and force her to look at me. “I need to know your limits to keep you safe and respect you.”

“We won’t ever be upset about a limit,” Lev adds in from her other side. “Do you need a break to think?”

She closes her eyes and I let her go, moving my hands away and respecting her space while staying close. When her eyes open again, I know she’s thought this through. The gray is so clear.

“I want to try it. I let Alexi fuck me in the ass, but it felt like an in-the-moment thing. I just don’t want to be gagged or silenced while trying it again so that I can tell you if I don’t like it.”

Her answer makes me proud. I reward her by kissing her and rubbing her clit.

“You’re such a good girl for us.” She moans in my mouth, and I open my eyes to see Lev moving between her legs. I glide my hand over, using my fingers to spread her open for him. The moment his mouth is on her tight pussy, Evie’s body surrenders fully to us.

I stand as Lev has his dessert and let myself get harder and harder while listening to the sounds she makes. I grab a

blindfold and take it to her, securing it over her eyes.

I check her restraints as she pulls on them, writhing under Lev's touch. One seems too tight, so I loosen it a bit just as Alexi moves to loosen another. I can hear Evie on the edge of another orgasm, so I stop Lev by pulling him up and pressing his lips to mine, tasting our girls cum on him mixed with Alexi's. I kiss him as hungrily as he went after Evie's pussy.

Her juices between us, mixed with the hint of Alexi's come, has me close to losing control. I pull back. "Did you clean her up for me?" I ask Lev.

"Yes, sir," he responds, and I see Alexi pipe up out of the corner of my eye.

He likes that.

I tilt Lev's head back then kiss and lick down his neck before pushing him onto the bed in between Evie's spread thighs. I kiss and bite down the length of his body until I reach his beautiful, glistening cock. I push myself between the bed and his length as he feasts on our girl so that I can take him in my mouth.

"Ah fuck, D," Lev says through clenched teeth.

His hand comes to the back of my head, but I let out a growl to warn him off. He gets the hint and moves his hands away so he's no longer touching me. Evie's whimpering and moaning over just what Lev can do with his mouth. Lev's piercing slides along my throat as I take him to the back and his moans join Evie's.

I glance over at Alexi to find him sitting there patiently. His eyes watch us, a smirk on his lips while his hands move up and down his hardened cock.

Lev's legs begin to shake when Alexi notices me staring. I decide to show off a bit by taking Lev even deeper. I can feel him start to swell so I pinch his balls, refusing to let him come just yet. I pull off of him, making him lift his head from between Evie's legs.

"Did I say you could stop?" I ask him, but he just looks confused as to why I didn't let him come.

“No, sir.” He still doesn’t move.

“Please, D,” Evie pants, struggling on the bed. “I can’t take any more.”

“Oh, my Little Shadow, you will take whatever I give you. But I’ll let you have a break, it seems our boy here forgot who makes the rules.”

I maneuver Lev until he’s lying beside our girl and remove her blindfold so she can watch. Her eyes flick to Alexi, still sitting beside the bed, stroking himself slowly.

With a devious smile playing on my lips, I bring their attention back to me. I let a string of spit fall from my tongue onto the head of Lev’s cock. His eyes ignite like a fire and my hand curls around his shaft in a tight grip. I work the wetness in slow, almost too tight strokes, making sure to move that piercing I love so fucking much. Sliding my hand up and down while rotating in circular motions.

When he’s squirming with need, I bend down to lap my tongue around the head of his dick, paying careful attention to the slit. Lev’s body falls back and he fists the sheets while I work him over. In my peripheral vision, I see Alexi make his way over. He climbs onto the bed on the other side of Evie.

Suddenly, a fantasy crosses my mind: Lev sucking Alexi while he eats Evie’s sweetness and I suck off Lev. My dick aches even more. I bet he would shit a brick if Lev sucked him off. But Lev is *my* good boy, and I’m not sure if either of them wants that, so I keep my thoughts to myself.

Alexi whispers into Evie’s ear loud enough for us to hear, “Are they neglecting you, Princess? Do you want Daddy to make you feel good, want me to make you come?”

Evie whimpers before responding. “Yes.”

“You were being a little brat outside.” He says as he lightly trails fingers down her abdomen. She wiggles under his touch, searching for more. “Maybe I haven’t decided if your punishment is over. Maybe not touching you is enough to make you behave?”

“No, please.” Her hips lift off the bed just slightly as the tips of his fingers hover over her entrance without actually touching her.

“Oh, Princess, I love the sound of your sweet voice when you beg. Beg harder and maybe I’ll give you what you want.”

That has both Lev and mine’s attention. Our heads pop up at the same time to watch Evie squirm.

“Please. Please, touch me. I need it,” she pleads, desperate for any point of contact as she writhes against her bindings. “I need you, Daddy. I need all of you filling me up.”

Alexi kisses her forehead. “Lev. Damien. Our girl is feeling a little left out. Why don’t you show her that two mouths are better than one?”

It sounds a lot like an order, even the control freak, but if there’s any place I don’t mind bending, it’s here for these people.

I crawl up the length of Lev’s body, hovering over him and give him a light peck on the lips before I say, “You heard Daddy Lex, baby, let’s make her squirt on our faces.”

Lev grins and twists underneath me until we’re both facing each other between Evie’s spread thighs. We both attack her clit, sandwiching it between our moving tongues. It’s like a messy, frantic kiss we’re sharing, only with Evie’s sweet little nub added to the mix, which makes it that much more addicting. Lev begins to thrust his rock-hard cock against mine as we lap our tongues over Evie’s pussy. She is going feral against the restraints. I wrap my hand around both mine and Lev’s cocks as we thrust furiously against each other, the taste of Evie driving us further into the pleasure-filled abyss.

“Fuck me, that’s hot,” Alexi says as he moves to kneel in front of Evie’s face.

“Ready for me, Princess?” Before she has a chance to respond, Alexi shoves his entire cock into her mouth. She moans around him and he braces himself with his hand against the wall.

He rolls his hips, sliding deep into the back of her throat, forcing her to gag around him as he pushes all the way in. I swear I can see her throat swell with his length.

I surge forward with new motivation as I turn my attention back to Lev as I spit on Evie's clit. He licks it off before dipping his tongue into her entrance. I move back to circle her clit. We all seem to be in sync. Like a dance, one that we have learned just for each other. It's almost enchanting.

When I feel his tongue start to travel back up, mine moves down, but not before meeting in the middle. He slides his tongue over mine, then sucks it into his mouth. Lev pulls back in order to suck Evie's clit between his soft lips. She tries to scream in response but it's muffled by Alexi's cock.

Damn, that's fucking hot.

My dick grows impossibly harder, all the while my hand never stops its movements, stroking Lev at the same time. We are all panting, so close to the edge. As if Alexi could read my mind, he grunts out.

"Can she come for us?" I nod as Lev pushes three fingers inside of her.

"Come for us, Princess, soak them while I fuck your throat."

She moans, her scream muffled around a mouthful of Alexi's dick. Her thighs shake and limbs pull against the rope. She's going to have major rope burns tomorrow. I make a mental note to take care of the wounds afterward with some aloe so they don't leave scars.

Lev and I thrust harder into my hand while I work the both of us over. Our cocks are slick with precum, allowing us to glide over each other so deliciously. The feel of his head moving over mine, his piercing seeming to hit just the right spot, has me ready to blow already.

"Fuck, you feel so good," I tell Lev before sucking Evie's swollen nub between my lips. I give it one little nip, and she explodes on our tongues. Her slickness pours out of her as her back bows off the bed. I nudge Lev's face off of her with mine

and the pout he gives me is so fucking cute. I know he likes to taste her release, but I have other ideas.

“You ready to fuck her?” I ask Lev as Alexi pulls out of Evie, still hard and swollen.

He nods, and I grab the butt plug.

“Ever think about fucking all three of us, Little Shadow?” I ask Evie, her post-orgasm face looking glazed over.

A flash of fear sparks in her eyes, but she gets the words out. “Yes, but I’m not ready.”

I crawl up her body and kiss her lips, loving how she melts into the mattress. “Cut the restraints, Lex.”

Somehow, we found a balance between our dominance in this little dance. He grabs the scissors and slices through the ropes binding her. Lev helps Alexi remove them from her limbs while I inspect and kiss her sore skin.

“This is how we’re going to start.” I put the butt plug in her hand, letting her get a feel for it so that she isn’t so intimidated. “We will make sure you’re warmed up nicely before we try that, but today we’re just going to practice.”

“Okay, I trust you,” she says, winding her arms around my neck. I love her tied up, but I also love when she molds her body to mine like she needs me as much as she needs air. I kiss her a few more times before moving back between her legs. I know at this point she’s too weak to hold them up for me.

“Hold her legs open, Alexi. Spread her for us.”

His jaw ticks slightly, but I know he wants this as badly as I do. He spreads her and Lev moves to kiss her as his fingers slide through her slick. He twirls his fingers around her clit and she whimpers in pain.

“Oh, you thought we were done? We’re just getting started,” Lev says, surprising us a bit before he picks up the pace, forcing her pain into pleasure.

I use that moment to coat the plug in lube and run it around her wet heat. Bracing at her entrance, I expect a fight, for her to tense up, but whatever Lev’s fingers are doing seems to

make her ass swallow the whole damn thing before I even have the chance to push it in.

I stare at the black silicone then grab the whip from the dresser and land a hit on Lev's ass, surprising him. He and Evie both gasp at the same time. I love their reactions. I take that moment to turn on Evie's butt plug, and her body nearly comes off the bed.

"Fuck you and your vibrators, Damien," she says panting, already on the verge of another orgasm.

"Oh I will, baby, and this time you're not coming until *I* say so." An evil grin dances across my lips as she glares at me.

I take the nipple clamps off the dresser and hand them to Lev. "Put them on her, nice and tight."

He does as I say, so instead of another smack with the whip, I take his length in my hand and give it a squeeze, pumping it a few times before releasing. I can tell he's pissed when I let go, but he holds back, so I reward him.

"Fuck her," I tell him, "And I'm going to fuck you at the same time."

Evie moans and Alexi looks shocked. I give him a second to get used to the idea of what he's about to see. He's never been uncomfortable about the two of us and has accepted everything we've been to each other. But knowing we fuck and watching us fuck are two different things.

If it's too weird for him, he knows he can leave and there will be no hard feelings. But after he let me press snow up against his dick as he fucked our girl, I'm going to have to assume boundaries is a very light term in our arrangement. Alexi looks wary for a moment but surprises me when he stands and starts speaking.

"Get on all fours for us, Princess. If they get to fuck that pretty pussy I want to fuck that sinful mouth of yours again. Maybe then you'll learn to listen to Daddy."

Lev helps her get to all fours, although he doesn't have to help too much because she practically obeys instantly. It's insane to think that just a few weeks ago we were all at odds

with each other and now we're here, having the best sex of our lives with a girl we never thought would be ours.

Evie presses her ass in the air as Lev slides into her wet pussy with ease. He rolls his hips, no doubt making that piercing hit her in just the right spot. I watch them get into a rhythm with each other, then I get behind Lev just as Alexi positions himself in front of Evie.

"Are you close, Princess? Do you want to come again already?"

Her head tilts back and her hair sticks to her body as she pants, "Yes."

Alexi looks at me, and I reach around Lev, pressing on the plug in her ass and making it vibrate even harder. Her hands fist the sheets, nearly shredding them in her grip.

"Come for him, Little Shadow. Come on his cock."

I fist Lev's hair as our girl starts to come, "You wait until I'm deep inside that tight ass of yours before you come," I nip at his ear. "Got it?"

"Y..Yes, sir," he lets out, just as Evie screams her release. "Fuck, fuck..."

I grab the whip and smack his ass, making a second mark. But it's hardly enough to keep him from coming, so I move back and whip his balls, making him stutter in his movements.

"D," he grits out through clenched teeth.

"Are you going to be a good boy now, or do you need another?"

Everyone freezes, waiting for his response. Even Alexi seems to be waiting with bated breath. Lev takes a deep breath through his nose then says, "Get inside me right the fuck now... *sir*."

I smirk, loving how our dynamic plays out. I grab the lube and coat my cock, getting it nice and ready for him before pushing it between his cheeks. He tenses up, but Evie rocks back into him at the same time she wraps a hand around Alexi's length and sucks on the head.

If I didn't think I could love her more, I was wrong. I push deep into Lev, leaning back a bit so I don't crush him on top of Evie, but also making sure to hit his sweet spot.

"Shit, baby," I say as my fingers dig into his hips. "You're so fucking tight."

I'm only one stroke in and already about to combust. The feeling of his ass clenching around me while he fucks our girl while watching her suck off our brother is euphoria. It may be depraved but it's sure as fuck beautiful. A mess of limbs and ecstasy as we all move together.

"Can you come for us again, Princess?" Alexi asks, looking close to coming undone.

Evie nods as a whimper leaves her lips. She takes him deep, and I watch as he wipes tears away. He cups her cheeks with both hands then pushes in further before thrusting into her face.

"Come for us, Princess. Give Daddy one more."

His words have us all on the edge, so I push Lev forward, making his front press into Evie's back. I reach around to pinch her nipple which sends her over the cliff. When she comes, we all fall with her. The room fills with moans of lust and growls of passion as we let go.

Once we're finished, we collapse in a pile of limbs, Evie on top of Alexi's chest trying to catch her breath. I look over at her; she looks sated, exhausted, and completely undone. Her body is limp, her hair all over as Alexi tries to smooth it back to see how she's doing. The whole point was to push her, but we never want to push her too far.

She honestly doesn't even look like she's in the room with us as she closes her eyes, her whole body relaxes and her breathing slows. When the three of us exchange a glance, we all know what needs to happen next.



Aftercare is one of my favorite things with Evie. Before her, I never cared much for the lovey dovey shit you were required

to do with a sub. I did it because I respected them letting me use their bodies, but I didn't get any joy out of it. Honestly, most of the time, it felt like a chore.

So when I scoop Evie into my arms and sit by the small pool while Lev gets it ready with bubble bath and oils, I'm shocked to find just how much peace the moment brings me. Subspace is great for subs, but for Doms, our high usually comes from having control. Except, holding her in my arms and pulling her hair back to keep it from getting more tangled brings me a satisfaction I didn't really know existed.

Alexi started cooking for us, his way of taking care of her after a scene, and Lev likes the intimacy of the bath, but this is what I'm coming to love. The sweet touches and her lying so peacefully in my arms.

This is what I wanted her to be able to have at night when we suggested she start therapy. I wanted to be able to hold her and see peace written into every feature of her face.

I keep my touches light and gentle, but I'm sure to stay moving so that she stays tethered to the present. One thing that can help prevent drops is having sure and firm anchors. My hand rubs over her head, massages her temples, then moves down her arms as I lightly massage her muscles.

I examine the rope marks on her wrists and kiss them gently, unable to separate myself from her skin. All too soon, Lev takes her and I finish my job by bringing them both water to rehydrate and kissing Lev on the forehead.

I strip the bed and set it up with clean fluffy blankets I know Lev and Evie both love. The table isn't large enough for us all to eat at, so I set up more bottles of water by the bed and bring over some electrolyte packages as well.

I can't help the anxious energy I feel from not being able to see her. So, as soon as I'm done, I move to the doorway and watch Lev take care of our girl.



Chapter 33

I'm floating. Every piece of my body feels like it's no longer part of me but something bigger. My mind isn't my own as I think about how good everything felt, but I can't seem to open my eyes. I can't seem to do anything other than lay here.

I feel gentle hands cleaning me up, then strong arms envelop me. I feel the water as I sink down, but I'm helpless to keep myself up, paralyzed in a state of euphoria I was unaware existed. This must be subspace. It's complete and total freedom.

All my life I've craved control and peace, wanting them to coexist within my mind harmoniously. Right now, it's there. I can feel it.

A body presses against me, but I can't tell who as I feel myself sliding further and further into the heat, the smell of leaves and spearmint surrounding me. My arms float to the top of the water, only adding to the weightless feeling in my chest.

A firm hand presses to my abdomen, keeping me above the water to breathe, but I'm not even sure if I want to. Life's gotten so hard. Every move we make is so stressful and overwhelming. All I want is this, whatever it is, to last.

My eyes slowly slide open as the aroma of steak reaches me and my stomach growls. We never ate dinner and my lunch was small because Alexi said he was grilling tonight. I want to bathe in his food. This man can cook. Whoever said food was the way to a man's heart had shit twisted. Cook a meal for a woman, and you've got a partner for life.

Long fingers thread through my hair, working water through it and dividing the knots carefully. The softness is how I know I'm in Lev's arms. Candles are lit around the bathroom, the tub is easily the size of a small pool. My feet are nowhere near touching the other side as they float to the surface. Lev helps guide my body so I can float on my back.

He supports me for a while, moving me from side to side and keeping the lightness in my chest for just a little longer.

Once I can move my hands, I tuck them close to my body, wanting to curl up into a bed. Lev clearly knows what I'm doing, so he folds my body into his. He takes a seat inside the massive tub while keeping me close.

His arms surround me, making me feel safe, comforted. Everything he always is to me. He's my safe space, my ghost. I tilt my head back and press a gentle kiss to his jaw.

"I love you," I whisper, so low I'm not sure how he even hears it.

"I love you most." The only reason I let him get away with that statement is because I'm not sure if I could voice anything else at the moment, and I don't want the euphoria to end.

Damien comes in after a few minutes and takes me from Lev's arms, not letting me do a single thing for myself. He

dries my body and dresses me in one of his shirts. I attempt to walk but should have known better. He scoops me up immediately and carries me to the bed. A gentle kiss graces my cheek, and then he's tucking me in, sitting me upright before the three of them pile on the bed with plates of steak and mashed potatoes. My stomach growls again, and we all burst into laughter.

"I've never met anyone that can eat like you," Alexi says, holding up his glass of wine as if to toast to me.

I raise a large bite of steak in turn and shove it in my mouth, moaning over how fucking perfect it is. The salt dots my tongue, making me salivate. The steak's texture is perfect as it falls apart on my tongue, and I don't think I've ever had a better piece of meat in my mouth. Well, maybe the three dicks in front of me. But this is second to that.

When my eyes open they are all staring at me, food poised just below their mouths.

"Keep that up, Princess, and you're gonna get fucked again."

I pull the covers around me and scoot back. "No, no, no, I need food." I shovel in a few more bites before speaking. "No touching until I've had so much to eat I'm going to pop or I swear I will start throwing fists."

Everyone laughs, and we eat before all tucking into the bed together. It's the most amazing feeling being surrounded by my boys. I find that for once, I'm able to drift off with nothing but happiness in my heart.



Chapter 34

I feel like everyone is holding their breath as we board the jet to head back to Elysium. The light smile Evie has been wearing for the past week starts to wane, and the seriousness of everything we are about to do starts to set in.

Since they have been so supportive of me the past few weeks, I've decided that while we have a job to do, I'm going to be the one that makes it fun. I take a seat next to Evie on the couch and pull her into my lap, pressing a firm kiss to her lips. She pulls away slightly, but I tip her back, laying her almost all the way in Lev's lap as I deepen the kiss.

The sex as of late has been wonderful, but just her warm kisses are enough to make my day. I take advantage whenever I can, and since they distracted me on the flight out here, it's only fair I do the same for the ride back.

“I wanted to talk to you before you leave,” Boris says, forcing me to break our kiss with a playful groan of frustration. He looks directly at me when he says, “Don’t worry, you can get back to that,” he gestures to us all laying on top of each other on the couch, “as soon as I’m finished.”

He sits in the chair in front of us; Alexi carefully lowers himself in the chair beside him. Their postures are a perfect mirror of each other. I have to wonder if they see their similarities the same way others do.

“Father, what do you need to say?” Alexi asks, his tone all business.

“I’ve debated on telling you this, but Arrow and I agreed it would be the best way to move forward.”

My ears perk up at that. Laney turns her head from the couch at the other end of the plane where she was pointedly ignoring my kiss with Evie.

“Arrow?” Laney questions, coming over to the seat beside Lev.

“Yes. You see, he was the one who made me aware you were on the island.” Boris speaks to Evie. Her body goes stiff next to me. Laney almost falls off the edge of her seat. Lev catches her, helping her stay steady. I rub small circles on the back of Evie’s neck with my thumb.

“You’re only just now telling me this?” Evie questions, anger radiating off of her in waves.

“Well...” He sits forward, scratching the back of his neck. “No one is really supposed to know who he is. A few years back, I found out my sister adopted a boy before she passed away from cancer. She and I were never close. She ran away when she was sixteen, refusing to marry the man my father had chosen for her. He let her leave, and I checked in on her from time to time. But once I took over everything from my father, our contact was sparse.” He takes a deep breath and looks at Alexi.

“He’s not blood, so I couldn’t bring him in and pretend he was. Not to mention, I didn’t want you to have any

competition for your title. Your mother never wanted that, and it's the reason we only had one child. Me not telling you was my way of honoring her. I gave the boy a choice. He could have money, I would set him up for life, or he could join the organization and become part of The Society. He took the job as the Dean this year to oversee and protect the three of you."

"How did you find out I was there if he was only watching the boys?" Evie questions, wondering the same thing I am.

"I had him take photos, just small ones for me to stay informed about your progress and advancements. When he started telling me about this girl, who seemed to rally the three of you as much as she divided you, I got suspicious and asked to see pictures of her with them."

"That's how you knew we were all with her?" Lev questions him.

Boris nods, looking ashamed. "I was just trying to look out for you. He told me a while back he wanted to be more transparent for the sake of a budding relationship with Laney. I told him to prove to me he was really all in with her. He has since proved himself to me so I told him I would give you the information. He wanted to do it himself, but I was the one who gave him the order so I told him I would be the one to deal with the consequences."

"He said that?" Laney asks, looking stunned.

Wow, not even she can see the two men literally drooling at her feet.

"He did. I hope asking him to stay quiet about who he was hasn't broken your trust in him. I want you to know you're as much a part of this family as Evie is now. You want to know something, all you need to do is ask. If you need me, I'll do anything I can to help you."

Laney's face twists in a mixture of guilt and sadness. Evie goes to her, wrapping her arms tight around her friend. "Can you—," Laney clears her throat, resolve in her voice. "Can you help me find my parents? Help keep them safe?"

“I already started looking for them after Havoc told me they were in hiding. There is a team that spotted your sister just last week. If we can find their hiding spot, I’ll bring them to a safe house where they will be guarded and protected.”

“Thank you,” Laney chokes out. Evie pulls her close and Lev stands, gesturing for them to sit. I put my arm around both of them, holding them close. “I’ll try to send a message to them to let them know you’re looking and that they can trust you.”

“Sounds good to me.” Boris scans the rest of us. “Is there anything else you may need from me before you leave? Is everyone wearing their bracelets?”

We all lift our wrists, showing him the black band. It’s a weird feeling knowing that only my family has these. It makes us feel complete, kind of like a wedding band defines a marriage. I feel like this defines something bigger.

“Very good. Good luck to all of you. I know your plan is going to be big, and I’m happy to work with Nessa to keep things moving forward off the island. In five months, this will all be over. Learn what you can, master what you know, and always watch each other’s backs.” He claps Alexi on the shoulder. “I love you, son. Be safe.”

And with that, the cabin doors are sealed, and we head back to Elysium. Another secret revealed and somehow, it feels like things are coming together. We’ll create a plan to take down The Shades. Then our girl is going to be free, and we are all going to get married and pump her full of all the babies. It’s going to be perfect. I can feel it.



Chapter 35

I crack open the window, loving the feeling of sneaking around again. I'm not that much older than the majority of the students, but the fact that I should not be climbing into my student's window in the middle of the night sends a shot of adrenaline through my body and thrill through my veins.

I slide in, keeping my feet and movements silent. Seeing her lying on her back in bed with her blonde hair fanned around her has my dick growing behind my sweats in seconds. I watch her sleep. Watch the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes deep, her body so at rest and unaware of the predator stalking her in the night.

She should really lock her windows.

I move to the side of the bed and pull back the covers, but before I can press myself against her, her body rolls on top of

mine. Her weapon is around her fingers, digging pointy ears right into my throat.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on a mafia princess,” she warns in a whisper against my lips.

In response, I roll my hips, pushing my erection into her and making her gasp. I love how her weapon digs into my neck and only solidifies the nickname I gave her while she was away.

I roll my hips again as I say, “Hey there, Kitten. I missed you.” I bare my neck to her, in surrender of anything she might want to do to me.

My girl doesn't disappoint.

She rocks into me, reaching between us and freeing my dick in an instant. My nostrils flare in response to her display of dominance; I’m painfully hard when she wraps her hand around my length and tugs.

“I need you to fuck me. Right now.” Her words are music to my ears. I switch our positions in an instant, pushing myself into her from on top. Her pink lace nighty is bunched around her abdomen; I can’t help but hope she went to sleep with nothing underneath just for me. Her tight, wet heat envelops me, and I soak in the feeling of my girl around me.

Mine.

I brace my forearms above her head, pulling all the way out just to slam home again, and she moans.

“Yes, again. Please.” Nails scratch into my back while I give her what she wants. Her back arches beautifully off the bed, and her heels dig into my ass. I love it when my girl is rough with me and marks me up.

“Fuck, Kitten, you feel so good.” Laney’s arms wrap around my neck, leaving no space between us as I pump into her with the force of a man possessed. “Rub that pretty clit for me, come with me.”

Her hand slides between us without hesitation, and I groan at her compliance. I know her—it won’t always be like this.

So when she gives me the control, I'm sure as fuck going to make it good for her.

“Such a good girl, my good fucking girl.”

“Yes, yours.” Her voice is nearly breathless. We've hardly been going for two minutes, and I know I have her on the edge already.

I feel her clench around me over my praise. Keeping my pace, I move her hand and replace it with my own. My fingers rub hard and fast over her clit until I can't hold on anymore. Just as the sensation begins to rush through me, I pinch her sensitive nub and she comes undone right along with me.

I don't stop until she's milked me for every drop, and her arms fall heavily back to the bed. She looks so fucking sated that I can't help but smirk.

“Did you miss me too?” I ask as I fall on top of her, nudging her ear with my nose and inhaling her scent.

Fuck, it was only a few weeks, but I never want to be away from her for that long ever again. She rolls us so that we are both on our sides.

“I did, but I'm honestly a little mad at you.”

I thought this might happen. I wanted Boris to tell them the truth so that they believed me, and so that I didn't have to see my girl's face when she found out I had been hiding who I was from her.

“I'm sorry.” I cup her cheek and force her gaze to meet mine. “I know it's not an excuse, but I believed it was really for the best. I didn't want you involved. I wanted you to be safe.”

She bites her lip and I rub my thumb over it as it slides between her teeth.

“Do you think you can forgive me?”

She laughs and hell, I missed the sound of her filling up a room. “I think you've already got your answer there, old man. I let you fuck me, didn't I?”

“Did you just call me an old man?” My heart actually hurts a little bit over that. Just a little. *I just turned thirty, what the fuck?*

“How old do you think I am?” I ask as I sit up on one arm, looking down at her. She rolls on her back as she answers.

“Aren’t you like thirty-five?”

“Wow.”

“What? I thought one of the instructors said they couldn’t believe someone in their mid-thirties could look as good as you do.” She shrugs as if that was all the explanation needed.

“I just turned thirty this year,” I say in a serious tone as I wrap my hand around her throat. “I’m *not* an old man.”

Her face turns in my hold, a grin playing at her lips. “Whatever you say, *old man*.”

She whispers the last part, and it’s almost enough for me to fuck her again to put her in her place. But that’s not why I came here. I let go of her neck with a sigh.

“As much as I missed this,” I cup her pussy with my hand and push my cum back inside her. She gasps and grinds down, tempting me but not quite enough to distract me. “I also missed you. How are you doing? How are things with Evie?”

The lust-filled gaze fades as she moves to sit up. “I’m going to clean up then make us some coffee and we can talk. I can’t talk casually with your fingers inside me, trying to prevent your cum from dripping out.”

I laugh, “I’ll clean it up for you with my tongue if you like.”

A flash of arousal goes through her, and I feel like she might take me up on the offer. Fuck, I want her to. She leans in and kisses my lips, soft and sweet, then gets up.

“No, I missed you. I want to talk too, and then maybe more of that.” She winks as she walks into her bathroom. I tuck myself back into my sweats, not giving a shit about the mess. I’ll wear her cum like a medal of honor.

We settle into the couch with coffee as she tells me all about her trip. How she and Evie are back to normal, how she saw a man tortured to death and just how much it bothered her. She tells me about her being there when the shock of who I was hit. I realize now there's going to be a lot of groveling ahead. As well as a lot of orgasms. The second isn't as much of a chore though.



I walk into the classroom, to the shock of the students waiting for their usual professor. We lost a few of them to Bryce's cause. Evie and Laney are sitting together with the Kings surrounding them. Their eyes all go wide.

“Good morning class, I'll be teaching your finals course.” I set my stuff down on the desk as I face everyone. “In this room, we are going to learn a little bit more about our history as an organization and a university. Additionally, we will be discussing your upcoming trials.”

I make eye contact with Laney and forget the rest of my words.

Fuck, she's beautiful today.

A tight pink crop top squeezes her tits, pressing them up into her face, thoroughly distracting me. She notices and tries to sit up straighter, but then her hair falls forward into her shirt and all I can picture is the marks I left on her just under that low collar. It isn't until Evie clears her throat with a smile dancing on her lips that I'm drawn from my silence.

“So,” I clear my throat as well, trying to regain my composure. “Who can tell me why the university is called Mafie and not Mafia?”

Eyes dart around the room, looking to who might want to answer the first question of the day. Slowly, Evie raises her hand.

“Miss James,” I nod in her direction.

“Mafie is the original term for the people that grouped together and revolted against the farmers of Sicily. When the

farmers stopped paying fair wages to those who protected their lands, they planned a revolt. Instead of a physical battle, they fought with strategy and will. They refused to work for the farmers and used tactics such as racketeering, bribery, even blackmail to force the farmers to increase their wages. Eventually, they were chased out and those were the original ‘Mafia’”

“Correct. When the Italian government finally decided to help the island of Sicily with their crime issue that they created by pushing so many into poverty with wage thieving, they forced those who were part of the mafie out. A small group of those men are the ones that found this island here and established this university.”

Damien raises his hand. “Yes?” I question.

“So, how did we all get here then? There’s only one person in the room with Italian mafia heritage. How did it grow?”

I raise my eyebrow at him. Firstly, for knowing the background of each student in this room, and secondly for asking such a good question.

“That’s a good question. While they did work closely with the Italian mafia at first, as organized crime grew, they enlisted more and more crime syndicates.”

Laney raises her hand next and I nod to her. “But the foundation of the Italian’s is still fairly strong in our studies as well as the traditions of the school, correct?”

“Precisely. It’s why a lot of our phrases such as ‘Cosa Nostra’ are Italian based even though this is now the headquarters for the future rulers of the underworld.”

I continue with our history, then instruct the students to pair off with people of other families to learn more about each other’s histories and traditions.

Laney is paired with Akio, the future leader of the triads. His English is strained, but she surprises the both of us when I approach to help facilitate questions.

“Nihongo de hanashi shitahōgaidesu ka?” Her Japanese is flawless.

“Sono hō ga kantandarou.”

“Anata no soshikide wa kaisō wa dono yō ni kinō shimasu ka?” Her gaze flicks to mine, letting me know to back off.

Well, they clearly don't need my help.

I move to Alexi who's paired with a member of the American Irish mafia.

“Look man, I don't want to end up like Bryce for pissing you off. I'm cool to just sit here and pretend we are doing this if you are.” Ralf sounds legitimately concerned about being paired with the head of the Russian mafia.

Just as I plan to interject, Alexi raises a hand to stop me.

“Bryce got what he deserved because he touched my girl. If you keep your hands to yourself, I am sure we will be able to complete our assigned task just fine.”

The kid tucks his hands into his pockets before he begins talking through the assignment, so I leave them in order to save the poor Italian kid from Damien.

“Holy shit, so you're like the legacy of legacies. The great-great-great-great grandchild of the founders here?”

The kid looks confused before answering. “You do know there are many Italian clans and not all of them originate from Sicilian heritage, right?”

“Oh fuck, for real? How does that even work? Do you have territory grid lines? Have you ever crossed one just to see if anything would happen?”

I roll my eyes and check on more of the students as I make my rounds. Some need help finding new questions to ask, while others have a slight language barrier that I attempt to help them with. I don't know all of the languages in the world, but I know enough to be qualified for teaching here.

As the clock approaches the end of the period, I gather everyone's attention.

“For this week's assignment, you will submit your idea for the trials to me. It doesn't have to be perfected. At this stage,

we are just looking for a rough concept. We need to know it's realistic and begin to set up times for evaluations in the arena. I will work through approvals with the board and help give you the tools you need to accomplish your goals. The only rule is that none of the families of the people in attendance are allowed to be targeted. This is not a time to seek vengeance for your father or grandfather's crimes. This is your time to prove who you are to The Mafie Society." I look up at the students before giving Laney a smirk. "Do me a favor and don't fuck it up."

Students begin to file out at my dismissal, but Evie, Laney, and the guys stay seated in the back. Once the last person is gone, they move to the seats at the front—Evie in the center.

I sit in front of her. "Before we begin, I would like to apologize for keeping who I was to all of you a secret. I know I took those pictures of you all and you could feel that I violated your trust. I want to assure you I was only acting out of interest to keep all of you safe."

"As long as you can promise not to do anything else behind our backs," Evie says, "then we can let it go."

"That I can promise you. So, how's life being back on the island?" I ask Evie.

"It's weird being back in my old room with the guys. You know, the one right across from Laney's." I pale slightly as she gives me an assessing look, clearly having heard us last night. "But I'm also glad to be here. I want to tell you about my idea for the trials."

"Okay, write it down then."

My assignment instructions were clear. Just because I was told to protect them doesn't mean they get special credit. I see Alexi tense next to her and I prepare myself for the shit storm about to go down. I'm not one of their friends while I'm in this role, a line needs to be drawn.

"Actually, that's the thing. I don't want to write it down. I want you to get permission from The Society for us to use extra resources in order to pull off the trial we want to set up.

We need you and Havoc and Boris on the team. I want it to be discrete and undercover.”

She holds strong under my glare and I have to give it to her, this girl has balls. I’m deeply impressed with her determination, although I refuse to let it show until she’s earned it.

“What about The Society isn’t discrete?” I ask.

Evie looks at her friends and then back at me. “Let’s not play stupid here. You know as well as I do The Shades have no limits. They have eyes everywhere. It’s what’s made them so powerful. If you want to sit here and establish dominance because you’re the teacher, I can assure you I’m not one to bow.”

I lift an eyebrow at her but already know her truth in that.

“So, if you could go ahead and start acting like a member of the team, we can start treating you like one. Or I can treat you like someone in my way. And for Laney’s sake, I really don’t want to have to do that.”

I knew this girl had bite but holy fuck. I look at Laney and she holds her head high. She’s chosen her side. I can either join the fold or sit on the outs.

“Fine,” I say resignedly, sitting down at my desk, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I’m just trying to be professional here. But I understand this is a special circumstance. I want to be on the team, I just don’t need anyone at the university targeting any of us because it seems like there’s special treatment.”

A puff of glitter flies in the air around me, and I cough as Damien rounds my desk and pulls me up into a hug. “We knew you’d make the right choice, welcome to the family.”

It’s then that I take in their clothing and let out a laugh when I read Laney’s shirt. It’s so clearly made for her. I can’t help but wonder if Evie got it for her, along with the unicorn necklace sitting at her throat.

They’re all wearing shirts with odd sayings on them, and I refuse to even ask about Alexi’s. For a split second, I swear I’ve been transported to another universe if Damien is actually

wearing a shirt with a pouch of glitter attached. Instead of diving too far into this alternate universe, I pull the focus back to reality and choose to ignore the puff of glitter I know will be damn near impossible to get out of my hair for the rest of the week.

“What’s your idea, Evie?” I ask as I sit back down, avoiding Damien who is perched on my desk next to me, pulling his legs up and crossing them. *What the actual fuck is happening to my life?*

“I want to take down The Shades.”

I put my arms on the desk and let my head fall into them. *Fucking fuckity fuck fuck. Yup, my life is a joke.* I lived to be thirty, and my girl and her friends are going to get me killed. I already know it.

“Dramatic much?” Laney quips, and I lift my head to see her laughing.

“We can do this,” Evie says with confidence. “Just hear me out.”

I prop my head on my fist and listen to her, trying to take in everything without telling them they are all going to die.

Correction, we are all going to die.

“We need to set up a fake meeting point for Boris to spread. We know he has a rat, and eventually the information will get back to my uncle. Meanwhile, I will be pulling the strings he has here.”

“We should use the airport,” Nessa adds in and Evie nods.

“If we can get word that a make or break shipment is coming through the new airport, we can lure him there. From that point, it becomes an ambush. His guard will already be up, but that’s better than surprising him because we can watch as he moves in and isolate his teams while maneuvering him right to the center of our trap,” Evie explains.

It’s not the worst idea.

“We could use the towers as a vantage point,” Laney adds. “Lev could run security up there, keeping track of all of us

while also telling us where to go.”

“And since there are two towers out there,” Nessa adds, “Boris and I could run the other tower, shutting down power and helping position them to the right places. I’ll be able to keep an eye on the ground and be a backup sniper.”

“Arrow and I could use our bows from the roof,” Laney says, as though I’m already part of the plan. “Nessa could move the teams and give us the advantage. We would be able to take them out quickly with flash arrows.”

“Or you could stay in the tower with Lev while I take the roof,” I suggest, wanting her to be more protected.

“Not gonna happen, old man.”

My shoulders rise in a controlled breath, trying not to lash out at her. I cannot put into words how angry it makes me to think about her being in harms way.

“I just want you safe,” I confess quietly.

“Then keep me safe.” Her tone is so casual as if preparing for open fire, even on high ground, were something that simple to protect her from.

“We can construct some of the planes to be safe points if any of us get caught in the crossfire,” Evie adds, changing the subject and moving forward.

“I’ve got your back, Little Shadow. We will make sure to capture your uncle together,” Damien offers.

“I can handle the front lines,” Alexi adds. “Havoc will help me rig some bombs, especially if he knows their typical movements.”

The name of that man has the hair on my neck standing up. We don’t know anything about him and have no idea if he could double cross us at any moment.

“Why would he be part of this?” I ask, my voice a little too harsh.

“Because I trust him,” Evie snaps back. “He protected me; he came after me. He’s also initiated into the Bratva, so if you

have a problem with him you better let us know now.”

My jaw clenches at the line drawn before me. The only real problem I have is with the way he looked at Laney, *my* girl, and that he’s been training her the past few weeks while she was away from me.

“I trust him too,” Laney adds. What was intended to reassure me only has my blood heating more.

“Just because he helped teach you to fight doesn’t make him one of the good guys here,” I tell Laney.

My anger feels out of control now, like a raging wildfire, but I don’t know what else to do. It’s like the flames are only being fanned, taking over my normally collected thoughts.

Evie matches my energy, shooting to her feet and everyone watches her in awe as she prepares for a fight.

“None of us are good guys, Arrow.”

The way she spits my name at me feels worse than her words.

“But if you’re not man enough to accept help because of your ego then tell me now.” Her voice lowers to a threatening sort of calm, reassuring the room just how much control she possesses and just how little I have.

I shake my head and stay in my seat, not wanting this to turn into an all out brawl. I know if I go up against Evie, all the Kings will jump to her defense, even though she clearly doesn’t need it.

“Keep us away from each other and there won’t be an issue,” I say dismissively. I could swear hurt flashes across Laney’s face, but she turns her head back to Nessa as she finishes the plan.

“If we push them to the north end of the building,” Nessa says, “you can split them into two groups, giving our rooftop eyes an easy target as well as leaving the center vulnerable. Evie and Damien could hide in the bunker towards the runway, then head out when ready to extract the target. If Alexi can teach Evie to ride tactically over the next few months, we can

have Laney hit him with a sleep dart so Evie can pick him up. She could even throw him over the bike while she's moving."

"Easy?" Evie questions like Nessa has lost her mind, and I have to agree with Evie.

I try to help her out though, knowing we will all need as many skills to accomplish this as possible. "If he can teach you to ride," I say, "I can teach Laney how to shoot sleep darts. If you prefer a car, I'm sure Damien can teach you that way. Although, with that, you'll have to stop and get him into the car."

"I can teach you all sorts of things," Damien says to Evie with a wink, and she rolls her eyes.

I've known for a while now that she's with all of them, but I'm only just starting to see how that works. Instead of it being weird, it actually makes a lot of sense. They all seem to add to her strengths in a different way. Alexi has her back, Damien brings comedy and lightheartedness, and Lev is clearly her comfort. It's like they are all in sync, seeing what one another needs before any of them realize it.

I don't understand how they formed that bond, but I am glad to see it works for them. I don't think I could ever be part of a situation where I was forced to share what's mine, but I'm glad they're happy.

"We have a few months, maybe I can learn both. We can see what the mission calls for when it's time. It's best to be versatile, right?"

"Right," Nessa agrees.

"So?" Evie asks me.

I meet each of their gazes before I lock onto Evie's. Taking a deep breath, I stand and hold out my hand to Evie. She takes it and with a firm tug on both ends, I put my life in her hands. "Let's go take down some Shades."



Chapter 36

We all had to sleep in Evie's room for the night while they finished construction on our new suite. Since we had to trade off always having Evie's tracker, it was easier to stay here than figure out other living arrangements. It wouldn't look suspicious if she was in her old suite, and it honestly kept her safer to have everyone around until I had our suite upgraded.

But it's ready now, and it's the size of a house. The main difference is having our primary bedroom on the third floor. We all have our original individual rooms on the second floor if we need them, but I don't think they will be used for much. Nessa and Laney's rooms are on the first floor along with the main kitchen area and a large coffee bar. I say 'main' kitchen because I did have a small kitchen fitted into the primary.

I lead Evie into our new home. Everything feels right as she takes it all in. I was anxious to show her everything I had chosen for her, maybe more than when she arrived in Russia.

When I went to the library to fetch her, I had to hide my shaking hands behind my back.

When I lead her up to the suites with one hand on her back, I hold my breath in anticipation of her thoughts on the place.

“This is ours?” she asks in awe.

“It is.” I take her hand, leading her inside to show her the main areas first. I had the living area set up with large lounging couches and a screen the size of the wall so we could all have movie nights here instead of having to go to the library. I show her the rooms on the second floor, and she seems puzzled by them since it’s basically the same thing as our old suite.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh nothing, I was just...” she pauses.

“Just?”

“I kind of thought we might all be sleeping together.”

She picks at her nails nervously. “It’s no big deal though. I think I was just surprised you had everything upgraded, but our rooms look practically the same.”

“Come with me.” I usher her towards the back to where a staircase is hidden behind a partition that’s made to look like a wall cutout from the other side of the room. The surprised look in her eyes makes me feel like I actually know how to do things right for her.

As Evie climbs the stairs, she notices the door is locked with a fingerprint scanner.

“Really?” she asks, not approving of my over protective ways.

“Your print is in there. Open it.”

I scoff at her surprise. I’ve given her no reason to think that just because I gave her space doesn’t mean that I take her

security any less seriously. The bracelet my father got her is just an addition to the madness I had planned, but I did dial it down a bit after she asked me to. I don't track her movements twenty-four seven. That has to count for something.

The idea of anyone sneaking into our room while we sleep is enough to put me on edge. This security measure is for all of us.

The scanner beeps and the door opens, revealing a massive four poster bed with hidden hard points throughout as well as above the bed. They are strategically placed to look like hooks for the massive light fixture above.

To the right is the small kitchen for the four of us any time we need space or privacy after strenuous activity. There's a mini coffee bar right next to the entrance for the primary bathroom, so she can get a cup of coffee before she has to shower.

I watch as she goes to the bathroom to find a jacuzzi tub large enough for all of us and a shower that is practically another room itself. The closets at the back are organized alphabetically and washing machines nearby so we can do our own laundry, avoiding any prying eyes as to what we are up to when we are alone.

Evie gasps as she sees the three different shower heads. I had a strong feeling she would appreciate those upgrades. I also installed a large sitting area for us next to balcony doors that slide all the way open to reveal a patio with seating and a small fireplace.

It's luxurious, intimate, and all ours.

"What do you think, Princess? Is this castle fit for you?"

She squeals as she runs towards me and throws her body into mine. I lift her in my arms, adoring every moment of her embrace.

"It's perfect. For all of us. You know Lev is going to try to live on that balcony overnight. I can already see you making us dinner in the kitchen. And Damien is going to go crazy in that shower. Hell, I might join him."

The tinge of pink that touches her cheek at that admission is perfection. I kiss her, dipping her back.

“And what will you enjoy most?”

She bites her lip, giving me all sorts of ideas as she backs up slowly. “This giant ass bed.” She jumps into it, tossing the decorative pillows aside and pretends to swim, making me laugh.

“I love your laugh.” She walks herself to the end of the bed on her knees, meeting me with a kiss.

“I love when you smile like this.” She is literally glowing in front of me, her silver hair illuminating with the way the chandelier above casts light over her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I check to see Angelo’s name pop up.

“Our captain is here to talk about his role for this semester. Would you like to join me?”

“I really want to go on a run by the cliffs, I missed the sea air.”

“Sounds good to me,” I kiss her one final time. “I will be in my room in the study if you want to stop by before you leave.”

She nods and heads to the closet to get dressed for a run. I swear I bought every single kind of athletic clothing I could find for her. She goes through clothes like crazy with how much she works out and how often we all like to rip them off of her. I hope she likes what I picked.

Instead of letting myself spiral and wonder about every little thing she could be thinking, I head downstairs and greet Angelo. We enter my room and walk to the study hidden within my old closet.

“I wanted to discuss what we are going to need from you this semester.”

Evie’s squeals interrupt me. I watch as she practically skips over to the man and crushes him in a hug.

“Hello there, my sweet girl. It is so good to see you on your feet and smiling again.”

She squeezes him tighter.

“Next time we go back to Russia, you’re coming with us. I won’t be spending that much time without you again. Got it?”

He nods and chuckles at her authority. They pull each other into one last embrace. I watch as the girl I’m learning to love opens her heart to another person that I can see truly cares for her. She rounds my desk and kisses me on the cheek before leaving.

“See you in an hour or so,” she calls back. She knows that’s way too long to be running this close to her recovery. A minute later, I get a text and find out why.

Princess: I’m not running for that long, Daddy. I want to go sit by the cliffs and breathe in the sea. Don’t worry.

Alexi: That’s my good girl.

I put my phone face up next to us should an emergency arise and get down to business with Angelo. I offer him a raise to help with the added labor. I will need him patrolling the water, and I also give him a bracelet that can be tracked. If he goes too long without checking in, I can review his movements and we will know if anyone breaks through. Evie has done a good job at keeping her uncle at bay, warning him that the island is on strict lockdown. I can only hope it’s enough to keep him away.

My phone starts ringing, Evie’s name popping up on the screen. I answer right away, assuming she wants one of us to pick her up after she pushed her run too far. But when I answer, the sound of a gunshot echoes through the line and a panicked voice rips my heart open.

“Cliffs. Now.” she says panting heavily.

Another shot rings through and I listen as it connects with her flesh, feeling as if it hit me too. “Motherfucker!”

That’s all I hear before the line goes dead.



Chapter 37

I remember thinking it was going to be a good day. We had plans nailed down with Arrow and got our new suite. I came downstairs to find the guys exploring, the girls moving in, and gave them all a wave as I headed out for a run. The one fucking time I actually put both headphones in to just enjoy the adrenaline rush in my veins, of course, is the time I need to be paying attention. Now I'm running through the dense forest that sits near the cliffs, clutching my arm where the asshole shot me.

I rub some blood on the bark, making it look worse than it is in hopes that I can trap the man chasing me and catch him off guard. I rip the bottom half of my new shirt that Alexi got me and tie it around the wound on my arm, careful to make sure the blood stops so I can set my trap.

Backtracking, I keep my steps even, making sure to sell the idea that I'm exhausted by adding knee prints here and there. I paint blood trails further down the bark as the path goes, so it looks like I'm having trouble staying upright.

I wore shorts today to make matters worse, so every branch and tall blade of grass is cutting at my flesh. My new tattoo hasn't been messed up, but the asshole pissed me off far worse than he realized. Hell hath no fury like a woman who's very protective over her new ink.

I work my way back and listen carefully. I can hear twigs snapping. He's close by. I quickly scale the tree next to me and move above his line of sight just in time for him to fall into my trap. A maniacal smile stretches across his face when he sees the trail I created.

What a fucking idiot, believing everything right in front of him. He creeps forward, trying to keep his steps silent. I take the time to control my breathing and settle my heart rate back down so that I'm no longer panting for oxygen.

I dropped my phone when his shot grazed my arm, but I still have on my bracelet, which means my psycho, control freak of a boyfriend has all he needs to find me. Not that I need him, I just need his car to get the bastard to the shed once I take him down.

I wait until my attacker's eyes are fully locked onto my trail as he creeps underneath me.

This is practically child's play for an assassin. Really, it's like the men sent after me have no idea who I am. I trained with the best. Yet, they are all quick to assume I wouldn't know how to hide if I was really that injured. They believe I'd actually just lay down and lead them directly to me.

Fucking amateurs.

I jump down, allowing gravity to use all my body weight as I land on the back of his neck, knocking him out for just a moment. Long enough for me to grab the gun from him and toss it to the side. My knee goes firmly to the center of his back. Quickly, I get his hands secured behind him with the

extra scraps of my shirt. I'm not usually attached to clothing, but the things my boys get for me are priceless, and this asshole ruined it.

My attacker tries his best to get out from under my weight, but I hold firm, adding extra pressure so his face is crushed into the dirt while I pull his legs up to effectively hogtie him. He pushes to the side, knocking me off balance and getting more dirt on my shirt.

"I'd really prefer not to kill you, but I will if you ruin another thing on this outfit."

These shorts were cute, and I will not have his thrashing cause me to rip a hole in them. His body goes still underneath me just as the sound of many footsteps come racing towards me. I let out a breath I wasn't aware I was holding and the moment Damien comes into view, I stand up, abandoning the man on the ground.

"Are you okay?" he asks urgently as Lev comes up behind him, a medical bag in his grip.

"I'm fine. Where did you get that?" I ask Lev.

He smirks at me. "I figured with you being a permanent part of my life this was going to be a necessity."

I laugh, and the man on the ground groans after a crunch sounds out. I look back to see Alexi landing a heel into the side of his head, knocking the man out cold. I run to him and throw my arms around him.

"Thank you for coming." I whisper into his chest. My body sways slightly, probably from the adrenaline rush and my lack of endurance.

"I'll always come for you," he promises and butterflies erupt in my stomach. His eyes go to my shoulder.

"I'm fine," I tell him, but he forces me to sit down on a nearby log.

"Lev," he calls, not needing to because he was already opening his bag and kneeling at my feet.

“It looks shallow, maybe a few stitches but other than that it’s okay. I’ll patch her up and get an antibiotic cream on it to prevent infection after the run through the woods.”

My head spins as I try to stand and my body starts to fall. Lev catches me. I think they all yell my name but I can’t actually hear them. Then, everything goes black.



“Calm the fuck down man,” A muffled voice says. It sounds like I’m underwater.

“He said she would be awake in thirty minutes, it has been forty-two and a half.”

“He said it could take her a while, but in thirty minutes she should start moving more, taking deeper breaths.”

“I cannot lose her.” The panicked voice helps pull me out of the stupor. My body feels heavy but other than that, I feel fine.

“You won’t, look at the monitors. We got to her. It was just a sleeping drug, she’s okay.”

“She was shot with a laced bullet on OUR island! How the fuck is that okay?”

“She caught the guy.”

Glass shatters and I feel my body flinch. Not out of fear, but I wasn’t expecting the sound.

“Get yourself under control or get out. You’re scaring her.”

I’m just able to lift my eyes when Lev and Alexi’s faces come into view.

“Fuck, Princess.” Alexi grabs my face, tears nearly falling from his eyes. He pulls me close to his chest. I’m hardly able to get a hand up between us. I push him back to see that we’re in our room when Doc opens the door.

“See, I told you she would be awake soon,” he says as he enters, which only causes Alexi to stare daggers at him.

“I’m fine,” I tell him.

I try to reassure him even though my voice sounds scratchy. I clear my throat and sit up, my head feeling a little full but coming back to normal quickly.

“You’re not fine,” Alexi mumbles as he helps me sit up and pulls the blanket up over me. I push it back down, kicking it to the end of the bed to make a point.

“I am perfectly fine—now tell me what happened.”

“The bullet was laced with a sleeping toxin. I assume the idea was that if they could at least graze you, they could capture you,” Doc says as he comes to the bed.

A bandage is wrapped around the wound on my arm, and I assume I have stitches. Not going to lie, it’s kind of nice to get them when I’m passed out.

“Where is Damien?” I ask, looking around the room.

“In the dungeons with the piece of shit that tried to shoot you.”

Alexi gets up off the bed to pace, but I ignore him. His alphaholiness is a little too out of hand at the moment. I got the guy. Who cares if a little bit of drugs got in my system? It’s not like it hasn’t happened before.

That’s when I have a small realization. Before I started talking to Dr. K, this would have felt like an invasion. Now, I can see it for what it is without letting it affect me too much. At least, not in a way that makes me feel out of control.

I mostly text with Dr. K, letting her know when I have bad dreams or when things start to get overwhelming. She’s always so kind and patient when responding. She gets back to me within fifteen minutes, even when I send a message in the middle of the night.

She’s given me so many coping mechanisms to use as I sit here and breathe, tapping my two fingers together and counting. I can already feel the tension over the event melting away. It’s amazing when you’re given the power to decide the things that keep a hold of your mind and the things you want

to let go. Not push it to the back of your mind and forget it's there, but actually help it disappear.

I've been working on facing my feelings. I know that one of the ways Alexi does that, no matter how annoying it might seem, is by pacing. So, I leave him to do his grounding exercises while I do mine.

This is the second man to get the upper hand on us. This island is supposed to be on lockdown. The only way he could have gotten in was if he was left over from the attack just before we went to Russia.

"Wait," I say, stopping Alexi dead in his tracks and Doc in his explanation of the drug in my system. "He isn't new to the island. We've been trying to figure out who this other player is, maybe he knows. He has to still be here from the attack in the arena."

Alexi's eyes widen and Lev grabs my hand. "Let's go find out," Lev says as he pulls me to stand up. I'm surprised when I don't falter in my steps, already feeling back to normal.

"As I was saying," Doc says with a smirk, knowing I stopped listening after less than a minute. "The drugs they gave you are similar to ones you're used to having in your system. It's likely you won't need a recovery period because your body already knows how to metabolize it."

"Are you sure she shouldn't stay in bed for a day or so, even a few hours?" Alexi questions. It's my turn to glare daggers at him.

"Try to tell me what to do, Batman. I dare you. I'll lay your ass flat on this floor before marching down there by myself."

Alexi's brows lift in a challenge, but he relents after a moment, likely because of a look Lev gives him from behind me. However, I choose to believe it's my badassery that made him accept reality.

"Let's go then," he gestures towards the door. When I move to take the lead, I realize I have no idea where we are going.

"Hey," I say to both of them, "why the fuck do I not know where the dungeons are?"

Lev chuckles. “We only just found out about their location. It’s usually kept secret, but after the events today, the great dean decided to share their locations with us.

“So rude,” I say, shaking my head. Lev threads his fingers through mine. We approach the ‘dungeons’ way more quickly than I expected.

“The gym, the fucking gym?” I ask.

I should have known. Of course, the place I practically used as a safe haven for the first half of the year would be just above the torture chamber for the island.

Actually, yeah, that checks out.

We make our way down a corridor behind the squat rack that I never realized existed and descend the stairs. Concrete walls surround us, and the temperature drops significantly once we hit the sub level. Pushing through the large door, white lights illuminate everything. In the center of the room, a man hangs from two chains. His arms are strung up behind his back, and he hangs at an awkward angle that I know has to be pulling his shoulders out of the socket ever so slowly. Damien stands in front of him, his fists and chest already bloody. He looks like he’s in a trance until his eyes land on mine.

“Hey there, Little Shadow. Come to play?”

It should definitely not be a turn-on seeing my man disheveled and covered in blood, heading toward me with the dominance of a monster who knows he’s at the top of the food chain. My smile stretches easily from ear to ear as I let him pull me up to kiss me like his life depends on it.

I take in his hard muscles, the way his chest is heaving, and how his breaths are still labored. Maybe his life does depend on it because this feels like a man no longer tethered to this plane of existence.

“It was rude to get started without me,” I whisper when he breaks the kiss.

He grins, and the blood on his face only makes him look even sexier as he says, “Hey, we all know the moment you lay your hands on him he’s a goner. I needed a little justice to be

served by these hands. Boris didn't have nearly enough men for me to punish over break, I need to keep these fingers in shape so they don't break under pressure when fucking you."

Alexi clears his throat, and I step back. Even though my posture stays playful and light-hearted, I can still feel the dread my dark knight brings with him. Damien may be someone who punishes, but Alexi is one who commands. And it's so fucking hot to watch.

No ma'am, not here. Get your vagina under control right the fuck now.

"Did you get anything from him?" Alexi asks as the man starts to wake up, a scream coming from his gagged mouth.

I watch as an evil grin contorts Damien's face, and I swear this man has never looked sexier.

"He has the Bratva tattoo. He's a mole."

Alexi's fists clench, and Lev growls as he lets out a venomous, "Fucking traitor."

Lev turns his attention to me. "May I?" he asks, gesturing towards the man screaming as his shoulder fully dislocates.

"Make him bleed, Ghost." He kisses me on the cheek before walking over to the table of torture devices, the only thing that makes this room look like an actual dungeon.

"Where did you learn to suspend people like that?" I whisper to Damien as I study the intricate way the chains wrap around the man's body.

"Let's just say there's a right way to tie people up and a wrong way. He earned the wrong way."

I snort in response. This man and his obsession with bondage has so many advantages. The three of us watch as Lev heats up the end of a crowbar. Well, damn. My ghost doesn't play around.

When he approaches the man, he rips out the gag and pinches his cheeks so hard I think he may break the guy's jaw.

“Being a part of the Sun’s Bratva is a *privilege*.” He brings the hot flat end of the bar and presses it to the back of the man’s ear.

Screams ring out all around us and that’s when I realize where I’d seen the mark before. I move over to Damien and see the sun symbol behind his ear. Alexi notices and pulls his hair out of the way, showing me the same mark but with a crown at the center.

“We all have them. Some cover theirs to be discreet. You can also opt for a UV mark in case you’re a member who is tasked with secrecy, or their involvement needs to be kept to a minimum. Only we know that though.”

As the traitor’s screams fade away, we watch Lev go back to the table and switch out the crowbar for some brass knuckles.

“Wait, I was sent here by them. I swear it.” The man screams in agony, but his words are clear. We all pause, taking the time to look at one another.

“By who?” Alexi steps up, walking to the man while Lev hangs back.

“I...” He snuffles. What the fuck is up with these weak ass traitors? If you’re going to go against the fucking Russian Mafia, you need to have a backbone. *Fucking idiots*. “My Boyevik instructed me and a small team to come here.” Another pathetic choked sob. “We were told to extract the boy and the girl.”

So his higher command is the real rat here.

“What is his name?” Alexi asks, barely contained rage simmering off of him. Carefully I approach him, threading my fingers with his and squeezing. The man’s eyes widen seeing us together. I have a feeling the man’s eyesight is worse for wear.

“I didn’t know,” he sputters. “I didn’t know she was yours.”

“His name.” The deadly calm in Alexi’s voice makes the man pale even worse than before.

“Victor Tamm. I’ve been his for six years now. None of us knew. I vow to you, none of us...”

The shot that rings through the room startles me. I never even saw Alexi remove the gun from the holster, much less aim and pull the trigger.

“What the fuck, bro?” Damien says running over. “I was just starting to have a little bit of fun!”

“He was useless. We have the name we need now. He did not deserve to suffer if he did not know. However, I simply cannot let him live after touching what’s mine, so I ended it.”

“That wasn’t your decision to make alone,” Lev says, stepping up to us. “We do this as a team or not at all.”

I can see the tension in Lev and Damien’s body grow, and I think I get it. We have been adrenaline junkies from the moment I got here, throwing ourselves into running or training hard at the gym. Since I got hurt, we haven’t gotten back into a routine. They need to get their anger out.

I kiss Alexi on the cheek before stepping back to take Lev’s hand and nodding to Damien.

“Come with me?” I don’t care that Damien is still covered in blood and shirtless, or that Lev smells like burnt flesh. I planned to meet with the girls for training after my jog; they can come now too.

I let go of Lev’s hand as I walk out of the room, and they follow me back up to the gym. Laney and Nessa are already there, warming up and stretching.

“You know you’re covered in blood, right?” Laney asks Damien with her arms crossed in front of her.

“Does it turn you on?” he asks her, waggling his eyebrows.

Nope, nope, no. A million times no.

I elbow him in the gut before Laney can respond. “Flirt like that with my bestie again, and it’ll be your balls I aim for next.”

He bends over coughing from my surprise attack and when he smiles at me, he actually looks excited about me hitting him in the balls. *Fucking masochist.*

I mean, I have no room to talk, but dammit it's hard to punish a guy who gets off on pain.

“Don't threaten me with a good time, Little Shadow.” His voice is husky, but I'm not falling for his shit today. We all need to train so we don't jump down each other's throats. Should Alexi have consulted us before he killed the guy, yes. I'll definitely be discussing that with him later. I just knew that if I let them figure it out, it would lead to hours of non-productive fighting. And we have some ladies to train. We can use *that* to expel some of this restless energy.

I press my body into Damien's as he stands up straight, intentionally pushing my very hard nipples into his chest. His pupils visibly dilate. “In that case,” I trail a finger down his abdomen, stopping just at the tip of his sweatpants that are hanging way too low on his waist at the moment to not temporarily distract me. I pause, then look him in the eye.

“Flirt with any girl in front of me again, and you won't see me naked for a week.”

His jaw drops as I push back before he can touch me. “Now, boys, let's show these girls how to take down a bunch of assholes.”



Four hours later, we are all dripping with sweat. I had no idea how badly out of shape I truly was until now. Nessa and Laney kept up surprisingly well, and after Damien cleaned off in the showers, he worked on footwork with them while Lev and I worked on balance. It is important when you are smaller than your target to learn how to use their weight against them.

I could see Nessa lingering at the end, and I felt like she needed to talk to me alone. I could try to meet up with her after a shower, but I have a feeling these men want to break in that new bed of ours. I have no idea when I would be getting

away from them, so I opt to stay behind for some post-workout stretching and invite Nessa to hang.

Laney seems jealous of my single invitation, but when I give her a look, she understands and leaves after a very sweaty hug is exchanged. I knew they didn't get along the best, but I could see a budding friendship coming to life.

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to grasp these concepts in time," Nessa finally speaks.

"What do you mean? You were doing great today." I move into another stretch as we talk.

"My punch lacks any sort of bite to it. I've never been trained like you guys have. My father is old and traditional. He frowned upon women training with the men. The only time I was allowed to train at all was if I had a gun. I'm a great shot because of it and a decent sharpshooter, but I've never truly felt like I could handle my own in a fight. That wholly scares the bejaysus out of me with what we are about to do."

Her shoulders sag, and I can tell she isn't used to talking about her feelings. Hell, neither am I. But the way she seems to fold into herself feels like she was conditioned to feel bad for sharing her fears.

"Nessa," I say, walking to sit in front of her so we are eye to eye. "If you don't want to do this I understand. I have no doubt you could pull off an amazing scene in the arena with your shooting abilities. I won't think less of you if you're not ready for this."

She shakes her head but refuses to look at me. "I chose you. I want this."

I lift her head with my hand, helping her see the truth in my words. "You can still choose me and not fight. I never want to ask you to do something that pushes you too far. I've been asked to do that my whole life. If that's how you're feeling, I want you to know I have too much respect for you to ask you to do something you're not ready for."

"Really?" Her voice cracks, and my heart actually hurts for this girl. The brave and strong Irish princess has a heart

underneath her cool exterior. I feel so fucking honored to get to see it.

“Really. But I still want to help you. Why don’t you show me the things you want to work on most, and I’ll see if we can come up with something to make you feel stronger.”

She grabs my hand and squeezes it. “Thank you.” She takes a deep breath. “The part that bothers me the most is how weak I feel when I throw a punch. I love learning the maneuvers to overpower them, but I want to know that when my hit lands, it means something.”

An idea sparks to my mind, and I grab her hand. “Come with me.”

I take us to the weapons facility, walking down the stairs to the equipment room we are allowed to purchase from and grab precisely what we need.

Matte black brass knuckles with a blade hidden in the handpiece and small black diamond studs encased in the front.

Nessa laughs. “Evie, no one uses these. They are ancient.”

“What makes you think no one uses them?” I question as I hand them to her.

“I’ve never seen them used.”

I shake my head at her. “When I developed the training program for women in The Shades, my first job was to figure out how to even the playing field with the men. I knew that no matter the amount of training it would be physically impossible to throw punches like half the guys we worked with. And I never wanted my team to feel weak.”

I help her slide them on, putting the one on her dominant hand with the blade facing out, the other hand with the blade facing in.

“I brought up the idea of these with Havoc. He tried to tell me it was cheating, but that’s the thing, Ness. If we play fair, we lose. For me at least, being the one who walks away from the fight is all that matters. We are the women of the fucking

underworld. We are powerful in our own right because we think outside the box. Men fight with just their bodies.”

“These—,” I point to the weapons she now wears around her fingers, “these show that you’re using your body *and* your mind. There’s nothing more powerful than a woman who uses all the weapons at her disposal.”

I can see when she accepts my words, letting the teachings of her misogynistic father fall to the side.

“We can forge our own path.” I take her hands in mine. “They may be blood, but family can mean many things in this world. You will always have a place at my side when this is over. If we can pull this off, just know you never have to go back to him if you don’t want to.”

Nessa pulls me into a hug, and I squeeze her back.

“I’m not sure if my father would ever let me go,” she says, stepping back. “But if we can pull this off, then I plan to stay the fuck away from him and the prick of a man he pawned me off to marry.”

It’s moments like these that remind me of why I created the program for The Shades. I wanted strong women who yearned to fight back. I wanted to empower them to raise their fist and fight for a world where women could do anything they set their minds to. As I see the resolve settle into Nessa, my heart grows, knowing we are one step closer to that world.



Chapter 38

We settle into the living room, and I pull up the screen we have been using to take notes of our plan and mark out each movement. We are finalizing everything today with everyone here. Arrow got the approval for our assignment. While I didn't appreciate how he dismissed Evie in class, I have a feeling this setting will show him in a different light. If it doesn't, then at least here I can punch him without having to worry about our image to the rest of the students.

So far, we haven't planned any relaxing activities for the higher-ups in the ranks for this semester and people are talking. Our group decision to have weekly parties isn't sustainable with the amount of planning required for the trials. So this morning, I sent out an email to the student body with our new reward system.

If you are in the top ten, below the group of us of course, at the end of the week your name will enter a raffle. At the end of the semester, we will each pick a name and owe them a favor so long as they pass the trials. Arrow will also offer a single second chance in the trials. Should anyone in the top ten at the end of the year not pass, they would get to try again.

The amount of planning in the past two weeks just to get the island under control has been exhausting. But I thrive on a well-ordered plan, and that alone is what has kept me going up until this point.

Well, that and the silver-haired beauty bending over the couch in search of her phone for the third time today. It always falls out of her pocket when she sits down, and Damien is now taking it as a challenge to see if he can find it to hide before she notices. He's put it in the fridge and now the microwave, making her think she's going crazy. But I think she's starting to catch on to the game.

"Damien, I swear," she yells over her shoulder as she continues to point her ass in my direction, tempting me to delay this meeting a little longer.

The trickster himself comes down the stairs with his hands raised. "Not me this time, Little Shadow."

She looks at me, but she should really know better at this point. I don't play games. Just then, her fingers brush against her treasure, hidden beneath the cushions before shooting daggers at Damien. "Not cool," she says to him then points at me. "Don't think you're off the hook, Daddy."

"What did I do?" I ask with a growl, pulling her close to me, loving every time she calls me that. It makes me feel like I own her. Like she's mine. It's intoxicating.

Her breasts push into my chest, and I have to breathe slowly through my nose to prevent a hard-on I won't be able to control when everyone arrives in three and a half minutes.

"You knew what he was doing and made me think I was going crazy." She huffs, pretending like she is actually mad at me.

“I will make it up to you later. How does that sound, Princess?”

She bites her lip playfully. “How exactly?”

I wrap my hand around her and grab her ass, hard enough to hurt. My Princess loves the pain because she knows I will always follow it up with pleasure. I bend her back and shove my tongue down her throat, showing her just how hard I’ll fuck her sweet pussy with it as soon as we get our work done.

She moans in my mouth as I deepen our kiss, lost to our surroundings for a moment.

“Ew, if you want us to all live together, we need to make some rules about common areas.” Laney walks into the room with her hand over her eyes. “I, for one, need to know I won’t walk into an orgy in our living room after a long day of class.”

Evie’s cheeks pinken before she responds. “Sorry, we can keep it to the bedrooms.”

“No chance in hell am I not fucking you on every single surface of this place before we leave,” Damien says casually before jumping over the couch and throwing an arm over Laney. He rarely touches any girls, so the fact that he’s sitting by Laney on the couch speaks volumes about the level of care he has for her.

“Damien,” Laney pushes away from him and Evie slides between them, looking oddly possessive over him. “Evie, please tell me he’s joking.”

Evie laughs as she settles into Damien’s lap. “I can promise no orgies without proper warning first. That’s the best I can do with this bunch, I’m afraid.”

“Who’s having an orgy?” Lev asks as he walks into the room, his hair wet from freshly showering after his training session with Damien. I’m not sure how much actual training got done from the substances sticking to their clothes when they got back, but I didn’t care. I know they are taking their role seriously; I’m trying not to be the controlling asshole all the time. Just, some of the time.

Okay, most of the time.

“No one, we need to get this started,” I cut in, stopping their banter because yeah, control.

Nessa comes running in with Arrow on her heels. “Sorry, these two guys nearly killed each other on the track. Arrow and I had to help break things up before things got too heated.”

Laney jumps up and moves right to Arrow. “Are you okay?” she asks, looking him over. He scans the room before pulling her into his arms.

“I’m great now that I’ve got you.” He kisses her, and we all pretend to act shocked. As if we didn’t hear them fucking the night we got back here.

“Hey if I can’t have orgies in common rooms then you can’t be doing that.”

Evie throws a pillow at them, but Arrow catches it and actually lets out a laugh. I thought we might see him differently here. Everyone settles in and I bring up a call from my father and Havoc on the screen.

Alright,” I say, getting started. “Over the past two weeks, we have chosen which classes will help us in our roles for the trial. I’ve briefed my father about the traitor, we’ve decided we need to let him live.”

A bark of refusals go up around the room before Evie comes to my side. She had to agree with the plan before I created it, so this all only happened with her blessing.

“Our plan,” she continues for me while everyone quiets down, “is to try and get the foot soldier to lead us to whoever he got his orders from. If we can’t do that, then in the meantime we are going to make sure word about a large shipment gets to him.”

My father pipes in then. His face appears on a screen with Havoc’s.

“The airport is officially under construction, but I have spread rumors to my two hands and their soldiers that we will be receiving many large shipments on the day of the opening. We plan to make it look like an exercise to get our bearings with the new location while using the opportunity to transport

thousands of pounds of cocaine, heroin, and hundreds of black market items.”

Havoc joins in on the other side of the screen. “I will work with Damien and Alexi to teach them about the strategies and movements of The Shades on bigger missions and how to counter position themselves. I’ll also be working with our scouts from above. Laney, I’ll show you how to get off a shot without being an easy target for them to hit.”

“I can teach her that just fine. Besides, I’ll be with her to do most of the work,” Arrow interjects, wrapping his arm around Laney possessively.

If there is anything I know now about the women of our world, it’s that this man just royally fucked up.

Laney pushes out of his hold before standing up and moving to sit by Evie. “Thank you for letting the room know that you think I’m incapable of doing the job I was assigned. I’m sure The Society will be thrilled that I let the dean of the school do ‘most of the work’ for me.”

She scowls at him, and for once, I don’t feel like pushing this meeting along.

“Kitten, that’s not what I meant.”

“He calls you Kitten?” Evie interjects with awe in her tone.

“Not anymore he doesn’t.” Laney crosses her arms and moves to sit on the other side of the room.

“I said I would be working with the scouts,” Havoc jumps back in, not seeming put off by the tension in the air. “Which means I’ll be working with both of you. I will also need to teach you how to make explosive arrows as well as train everyone on how to properly wire bombs.”

I see the moment Arrow goes on the defensive again, but Havoc is already speaking over him. “I don’t think you’re incapable. I’m working with everyone to give us all the best advantage here. We only have one shot at this. One. If we spook him, he has a million safe houses and connections. There’s way too many places to hide that we will never be able to find him. I’m not taking any chances here, are you?”

“No.” Arrow’s answer is flat, his eyes begging for Laney to look at him. It’s odd to me because normally when interruptions like this happen, it puts me on edge or makes me feel less in control. Yet, right now, all I feel is amusement.

“Now that that’s settled, Nessa, are you good with being my point person there?” My father asks.

I’m slightly surprised he doesn’t want it to be me, but it makes sense since they have already been coordinating while we were away. They likely have a routine by now.

“Yes, but I also want to learn more about how you run your organization. I’m planning to be a leader one day. Would it be alright if I came a few days before the team to help set up and coordinate? I want to see all the movements that go into place when pulling bigger jobs and how you manage your schedule.”

“Of course. We can discuss a date based on your classes.”

Nessa nods. I can’t help but appreciate how smoothly this is going. Everyone picked their roles well, and the way we seem to be able to work together at the same time only solidifies in my mind we will pull this off. My princess will be free.



As we wrap up the meeting, I walk up behind Evie and pull her close to me. “Want to help me make lunch for everyone?”

Her eyebrows raise in surprise as she turns in my hold. “You want to cook for everyone? And you want me to help? Alexi, I burnt popcorn last night. That would not go well.”

I laugh at her, still able to smell the burnt popcorn in the air.

“Don’t worry, I plan to keep you far away from the microwave. The key is not walking away when something is cooking.”

She tries to hit me, but I grab her hands and hold them tightly with one of mine. I chuckle, and the smirk playing at her lips finally turns into a laugh. “I want to show you I can

provide for you, for the family you chose. Let me teach you? It could be... our thing?"

Her features soften. "Our thing?" she asks. "I like the sound of that." I nod while a rare smile stretches across my face.

"Let's get started then."

I walk her through how to make some pork loin melts with roasted red peppers, and she manages not to burn anything. Once we eat, I get everything cleaned up before grabbing my keys.

"Want to work on riding?"

She gets up from the table, nearly jumping out the door. While in our meeting, I had a special delivery made for her. Angelo helped me make sure it could be a surprise.

When she turns the corner to the cover our bikes are parked under, she stops dead in her tracks. A red and black Ducati Multistrada V4 Pikes Peak sits next to my Superleggera. I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her.

"I figured you were going to need your own bike if we went through with this plan. This is the fastest off-road bike they make. You will be able to literally take it anywhere."

She spins in my hold and fuses our lips together. I hold her tight to me, soaking in her warmth as I wrap the custom-made black and red leather jacket around her. All of her nicknames are written around the right wrist.

"Alexi, this is too much." I shake my head at her though.

"I plan to give you the world, Princess. This is nothing but a tool for you to use to set yourself free. Are you ready?"



We've been on the track for four hours now and the sun is starting to set. Evie is able to get most of the basic maneuvers down. She has great control. I help her confidence with taking sharp turns. The lean can be intimidating when you are only an inch from the ground, but the skill will help her learn to trust a

drift if she were to need to turn around quicker than an opponent.

She stops next to me and pulls off her helmet, her silver hair fanning out. “How was that?” she asks.

“It was good. You could have leaned more, but we will work on it. I want to show you two other skills tonight that we will be projecting. First, I’m going to show you how to drift so you can make sharp turns or turn around quickly if needed. Then, I’m going to teach you to skitch.”

“That sounds safe,” she says sarcastically, causing me to laugh.

“Skitching is basically ghost-riding except your feet touch the ground. You have special shoes with titanium skitch plates that allow you to skim on the road while you duck down on one side of your bike. It’s only to be used if you are being shot at. On a bike, this is one of the only ways to protect yourself against gunfire.”

I toss my leg over my bike and put on my helmet then gesture for her to do the same. I ride next to her while I show her what I want her to try.

“Take this corner slowly,” I say as we approach the turn. “For drifting, you want to practice going straight, then lock up your back brake as you slow down. Get used to feeling the back wheel move around on you, then when you’re ready, lean into it and let it slide around you.”

We practice a few times before she gets frustrated. These aren’t basic things, especially for a new rider. Lev and Damien think I’m the perfectionist, but they clearly haven’t seen Evie try something new.

“Okay, I’ll work on that later,” she says, hardly refraining from tossing her helmet to the side. “How about that skitching thing?”

I laugh as we come to a stop. “You’re not ready to try that yet.”

“Show me and I’ll decide for myself,” she says in that brat-like tone of hers. I shake my head and grab the skitch plates

from my leather jacket.

I kick up my shoes, which are custom-made to lock in the plates, and screw them in before revving the engine and giving her a wink. Once I'm going fast enough, I position myself like I'm ghost-riding with half of my body leaning over one side of the bike, then slowly position my feet on the ground as sparks fly behind me. I kneel down, letting my bike be my shield so she sees why I want her to learn this skill. When I'm sure she has seen the movements, I carefully maneuver my foot back over my bike and return to her side.

"You're trying to kill me, I know it." She shakes her head. "How in the ever-loving fuck am I supposed to learn how to do that in just a few months?"

"You get out here every day. I'm not letting you do this unless I know you can protect yourself. You'll learn," I get off my bike and approach her, flipping off my helmet and grabbing her chin, "because I'm going to teach you."

She bites her lip. "Yes, Daddy."



Chapter 39

Today's the day. I've been getting away with texting my uncle for the past few weeks on an encrypted phone. But today is the day I need to set the scene. We need to make this believable. I've gone on a run, trying to squash some of the anxiety, but also to help add some panic to my voice for the call.

I've always found it easy to manipulate men. They usually only want one thing. And if you dangle it in front of them long enough, they tend to keep their eyes focused on the treat in your hand and not the giant hole you're walking them towards. The only problem is it was easy with men I didn't know. They couldn't pick up on my tells or see the truth in my eyes. They were easy to fool.

My uncle, on the other hand, may be an idiot, but he isn't stupid.

I go to my old room, crouch on the floor in the back of my closet, and hit the video call button. I'm in my workout clothes, dripping with sweat and when he answers, my eyes go wide seeing his face.

Fury and hatred mix together in my gut, but I'm careful not to let it show. Instead, I start talking fast, hoping like hell it's enough to distract him from the fact that I'm lying through my teeth.

"I got some information. I had to tell you as soon as I could. This is huge."

"Fuck yes," he cheers and nausea rolls through me.

"Write this down, fast. I was able to run away for a few minutes, but they are always watching. I'll call when I can, but you need to know that Boris just bought a new airport and he's having construction done now. I heard him talking to Alexi on the phone this morning. He's planning for it to be their main shipment port by mid-year. On opening day, while they work out the kinks in the flight path, every plane will be holding millions of dollars of drugs or goods that will be sent all over the world."

"Holy shit, Little Warrior, they are letting you really close if you were able to hear all of that. Are you sure this isn't a setup?"

His worried eyes meet mine, but I already expected this. I roll my eyes at him as if his idea was insane.

"I'm sleeping with him," I tell him, shocking him a bit. "I was in the room when he got the call, and I faked being asleep to get all the information. He came on a run with me this morning, and I was only able to lose him for a moment to make this call."

"I always knew you had it in you to do what needed to be done. Do you have any other information? An exact date?"

"No, all I know is that it should be in about five months. He talked about permits for something, but I didn't understand

that part, then he walked into the bathroom. I do know they need this. If this fails, they *will* fall.”

I try to sound menacing by picturing my uncle falling to his knees in front of me after we kill all his most loyal men. I imagine my blade caressing his skin, then running the jagged end over his jugular. I think about his blood staining my hands while he looks at me with defeat in his eyes.

“Well done. I will get working on this. You’re doing great. I’m so proud of you and your strength. Are you feeling better after everything?”

He attempts to look like he cares, but I know he doesn’t. He does this thing with his fingers when he’s bored with someone. He runs his thumbnail under his index finger. I wonder if he’s always given me his tell so clearly and I just never wanted to see it.

“I’m good now, back in training and feeling stronger.” At least that’s the truth so it’s easy to say. “I’ve got to go. Talk soon.” I hang up before I ruin anything. It’s rare we ever end calls without saying I love you. I wonder if he even noticed.

I take a few shaky breaths, pacing the closet for a moment.

“Are you alright?” Lev asks from his spot on the floor. I needed him here, and he didn’t hesitate to come when I mentioned how much his presence helped me last time.

“No,” I admit openly. Dr. K tells me I need to be honest about my feelings, and even though it sucks to admit to him that just that short little call rattled me, it really fucking did.

I feel like an anxiety attack is already brewing beneath my skin. The adrenaline mixed with the nausea from talking to the man who ruined my life has me contemplating running to the bathroom and forcing myself to puke in search of some kind of release.

I take a deep breath and stop pacing.

“What do I do?” I ask in defeat. “How do I make it not feel like this? I don’t want to feel like this?”

Tears stream down my face. I wipe at them angrily. *Why the fuck do I cry all the time now?* I swear if Dr. K tells me it's normal one more time, I might actually hurl my phone out into the damn ocean.

Instead of giving me answers to my problems, he pulls me out into my room and cuddles me on the bed. "You feel it, then you move past it. Stop trying to bury it, stop trying to hide from me, and just ride the wave, Lucky Charm. You are stronger than you think."

I take deep breaths and force myself to deal with it while I'm in his arms. I'm not walking out of this room until I have. The bad things can happen in here, but out there I only want the good. My men, my friends, my family. *My real family.*

Once the panic has started to pass, I snuggle deeper into him, inhaling his scent. As long as I have him, as long as I have all of them, this is all going to be okay. We are going to win this.

We have to.



Chapter 40

I sit on my bed with anxiety coursing through my veins. I don't want to do this. I don't want to let him back in. But I have to.

Adrik: It's now or never. Pick a side or I'll make sure you lose everything.

I chew on the inside of my lip, knowing this can only end one way. Looking down at my phone I notice how my nail polish has chipped on the ends of my thumbs. I haven't been a nail-biter since I was six or seven.

I school my features and take a deep breath. I got this.

Laney: I have information for you.

Adrik: I'm listening.

Laney: She's sleeping with them.

Adrik: Them?

Laney: Yes. All three of them.

Adrik: Does she still seem to care for them like before, or is it more of a job?

Laney: She acts caring in public, but when she comes to spend time with me, I don't know if she actually wants to go back to them. She usually waits until one of them comes to get her.

Adrik: How do I know you're not lying? You've been radio silent for weeks.

Laney: I've been trying to get close to her and figure out how to pass the trials. This is a full-time school, you know. You also told me she would be suspicious. I went silent so I could focus on the task at hand.

Adrik: Not good enough.

Laney: picture 1, picture 2, picture 3. I haven't forgotten my mission.

Adrik: I expect more information to come. For now, I'll call off the manhunt on your family. If I find out you're lying, they will be the ones to pay.

My hands shake as I type out a reply, tears stinging the back of my eyes.

Laney: Understood.

My breaths come out in shallow pants as I close my eyes, not wanting the tears to fall. *Why does this feel so hard? I have to protect my family. I have to keep them safe.*

"I know that was difficult for you, Firecracker," Evie whispers in my ear, pulling me close. "But we need him fooled. Are you going to be okay?"

I know she isn't the biggest physical touch person, but her body next to mine right now is the reassurance I need to know I chose right.

We planned on me reconnecting with Adrik in hopes of getting my family to safety. And now I'll be able to

manipulate him in other ways. We can never have too many advantages when it comes to that man and his reach. Even though I hated sending those messages, because it felt like giving him power over me again, I can't allow myself to look at it that way.

This time was different. This time, my best friend was by my side. This time, he was going to be the one that got hurt.

"I will be," I say honestly. "Hopefully him calling off the manhunt means Boris will be able to find my parents and sister. I'm hoping he can get to them and protect them."

"If they are anything like you, Firecracker, I'm sure they are all doing just fine."

A light knock sounds at the door and I half expect Nessa to walk in. Instead, large arms come into view and I roll my eyes.

"This is betrayal," I say as I lean my head back and press my fingers to my eyes, willing myself not to cry in front of this man.

Evie kisses me on the cheek while she whispers for only me to hear. "I'm still pissed about what he said too, but there's just something about them being here when it counts, ya know?"

I shake my head, not willing to move an inch.

"I don't know that. I don't have a harem of men who follow me around and scoop me into their arms when everything goes to shit."

"Not yet, at least."

I can't help but think she knows more than she's letting on. I feel when the bed dips then returns to normal as she gets up.

"Behave. If you make her feel worse, I'll cut off your balls."

I look at Arrow's expression to her comment from where he stands in the doorway looking like a wounded freakin puppy. What is it about men that makes them think they can be jerks then turn around and act like we kicked them?

He's still covering his junk as he takes a step inside and Evie closes the door behind her.

“I need to apologize,” he says. And yeah, he really does.

As if I don't already have a complex about being the most spoiled girl in the room. Or that I'm not constantly worried that everyone thinks I have no idea how to defend myself, then the man hasn't been paying attention.

“Go on,” I say as I wave my hand in the air.

“I didn't mean I would be doing most of the work as in- I would take over your role. You are perfectly capable of fulfilling your job. I meant that I would be doing most of the work to have your back up there and that was why I thought you didn't need the extra training.”

Ugh, I knew he was going to make this make sense so I would have to forgive him immediately.

“Get over here,” I tell him, sliding up half the covers. He climbs in beside me with a cocksure smile on his face.

“So, am I forgiven?”

“I won't even consider that until after cuddles and maybe two orgasms.” I give him my back and he tucks himself into me, wrapping his arm around my stomach.

“I can give you that. I'll give you whatever you need.”

He pushes his nose to the base of my neck, deeply inhaling the scent of me. When he presses a kiss on my shoulder, I have to hold in a shudder.

“Where did you get this?” He pulls at the unicorn necklace around my neck, the one I haven't taken off since I got it. I don't know why, but it makes me feel stronger. Just like the man that gave it to me.

“It was a gift,” I say, not wanting to tell him because I know he will freak out. Or worse, he will get me one himself and insist I wear that instead. *What is it with men marking their territory?*

“It suits you.” He trails kisses up and down my shoulder. All too soon, I'm squirming with need.

“Hmm,” I hum as he trails his tongue up my neck then nibbles on my ear.

“Two orgasms?” he whispers, his breath fanning over my ear, causing my skin to yearn for his touch. I nod. We both know I’ve already forgiven him. This is just for fun.

“And cuddles.” My voice is weak and breathy, but he holds me tight.

“Have I done enough cuddling?” He grinds his erection into my ass.

Instead of answering him, I turn in his arms and fuse our lips together while the necklace around my throat seems to burn. I swear I can feel both of their hands on me right now. I imagine what it would feel like to be between them. Havoc kissing down my neck and back as Arrow claims me with his tongue down my throat.

My heart aches for it with a fierceness I didn’t even know was possible. By the time Arrow undresses me, I’m full of a ravenous hunger I don’t really understand. I know Evie has her three men, and for them, things seem to just make sense. I don’t know how they navigate something like that, but there never seems to be jealousy between them like there is with Arrow. I don’t see any of the possessiveness that Havoc shows during our training sessions, always making me put my phone aside and not look at it as long as we were in the gym.

He knew the only person I talked to other than Evie, or randomly the guys, was Arrow. He wanted me to himself.

I moan into Arrow’s mouth as his thick cock fills me up. Even as the first orgasm crests through me, I can’t help myself from wanting more, from craving them both. Even though I know it could never work.



I wake up to the sound of my phone ringing. For the life of me, I can’t imagine who would be calling me. Without checking, I hit the answer button, only to be greeted by the faces of my mother and father.

That's when I see my part of the video reflected back at me. You cannot only see a sleeping half-naked man in my bed, but you can also very much see that my gown has been torn down the middle by said man, causing my tits to fall out.

I nearly scream as I toss my phone across the room, hoping and praying like hell this is all some kind of twisted joke. Maybe it's a nightmare. Yet, I already know when Arrow jumps up from the bed with my vibrator in his hand like a weapon, this is very very real.

"Honey?" I hear my mother's voice say. I sink into the blankets in shame and embarrassment.

"Holy fuck, is that your parents?" Arrow whispers. I shake my head and hide beneath the sheets. I can't bring myself to face the world right now.

Nope, I'm staying here with my face covered for all eternity in hopes that I never have to deal with this moment ever again for as long as I shall live.

I hear Arrow pulling on his pants and then walking over to the phone. "I'll have her call you back in a minute." I hear as the call ends. I refuse to look at him. I can already see it now. The stupid mocking grin. The dumb 'well that was a nice introduction to your family' line I know he's going to spout the second I lift my head.

"Kitten?" Arrow asks gently. I can't decide if I want to laugh or cry right now.

Well, my body decides to do both, and the poor man next to me has no idea how to respond to that when he pulls the covers back. I laugh as tears stream down my face.

"What the frick just happened?" I ask, my expression pained even as laughter continues to roll from my lips.

Arrow's brows pinch, making my face heat from embarrassment. I turn to hide in my pillow, hoping that maybe he will just leave once he realizes how much of a hot mess I am. Soon enough, I have the hiccups and a warm strong hand rubs my back.

“Maybe they didn’t see anything?” he suggests. I roll over to face him with an exasperated look.

“Arrow. Not only did they see you looking *very* naked in my bed, my dad just saw my tits fall out of my gown from where you ripped it last night. There is no coming back from whatever the heck just happened.”

I throw my arm over my face. *Hiccup.*

“This isn’t happening to me. My parents are likely safe for the first time in months and instead of talking to them and celebrating, I threw the freaking phone.”

He lets out a chuckle and I glare daggers at him.

“No, sir. You do not get to laugh right now. This is not a laughing matter.” *Hiccup.*

“I’m pretty sure you just laughed yourself into hysterics fifteen seconds ago, so you already know this is funny.” He scoots closer to me. “It’s a story we will tell our kids when they are teenagers, and we teach them about proper video chat answering etiquette.”

I’m lying here mortified over the fact that my father just saw my boobs fall out of my nightgown from where my boyfriend ripped it, and this man is sitting here talking about kids. Kids he doesn’t know I can’t have.

My body grows stiff at the thought. We haven’t talked much about the future. He hasn’t said anything to me about wanting kids until now. He notices the change in my posture.

“I didn’t mean we had to have kids or anything. I was just making a joke.”

“Do you want kids?” I can’t help but ask. I already feel like I’m drowning in shame, might as well add to it.

“Do you?”

“No.” My answer is firm.

I knew since I was eleven years old I would not want to bring children into this world. The idea was solidified when I turned eighteen and found out my role in my family’s

business. Less than a week later, I had it taken care of, ensuring I would never have to worry about the idea ever again.

“Then no.”

I let out a sigh. “That’s not how this works.”

“Not how what works?”

“If I told you I wanted kids, would you have wanted them too?”

“Yes.” The way he answers with such certainty has me growing angry for no reason. But I can’t seem to help it. Who just agrees with everything their partner wants?

I throw out my arms. “Why are you so agreeable? Did you want kids before you met me?”

He shrugs. “I never really thought about it until I met you.”

“And what did you think before I asked you.”

“The same thing I’ve always thought when it comes to you.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?” I don’t know why I’m on the defensive. He’s agreeing with me, telling me what I want to hear. I think I’m just afraid that one day, he might change his mind and ask for something I can’t give him.

“That I’d do whatever it takes to make you happy. If that means kids, then I’ll give you as many as you need. If it’s just us, then I can give you that too.”

I think about his words. I know in the depths of my soul that I don’t want kids. Not in the life that we live. But I do want more than just the two of us.

“Whatever it takes?” I question, needing to just ask this before I explode inside.

“Yes. Anything.”

Well, it’s now or never I guess.

“Even if that anything is having you as well as someone else.”

He flinches away from me as if I smacked him, and I have my answer. I think my heart actually fractures in my chest.

“Why would you want another man?” His guard is already up, his tone accusatory.

“Just forget it. It was just a stupid question.”

Even as the words leave my mouth, I know they aren't true. It wasn't stupid, and I needed to know. He gets in my face, pulling my chin up in his grip and forcing me to look at him.

“It sure as fuck wasn't just a question, now tell me what other man do you want?”

I shake my head in his grip, not wanting to tell him, but afraid he can already see the truth in my eyes. His fingers push in, and I'm about to hurt him back if he doesn't draw back really freaking fast.

“It's him, isn't it? *Havoc.*”

And just like that, my world feels like it comes crashing down around me. I don't give him an answer. I don't have to. Without a word, he pushes my face away from him, picks up his shirt, puts it on, and the door slams behind him.

Tears stream down my face as I curl into myself. This is not how everything was supposed to happen. My phone screen lights up beside my bed; I answer it as I sit up and wipe away my tears.

“Hey, Mom,” I say with my voice cracking. Now I'm crying for a whole new reason. “Are you guys safe?”

“We are, although your father is faking a heart attack after seeing a man in your bed.” She smiles, and it helps my heart feel lighter. *My family is okay.*

“Tell him I'm sorry about that.” My mother waves her hand at the screen in dismissal.

“He's fine. Now, tell me about that man because, from the view I just got, things look pretty serious.”

“They were,” I admit. A fresh wave of shame and regret hit me with the force of a plane falling out of the sky.

“Talk to me, my love.”

So, I tell her everything. About how perfect Arrow is and how gentle he can be with me. I tell her how protective he tries to be even when he knows I’m fully capable. When I’m with him, I feel safe. Then, I tell her about Havoc. How he took me by surprise. How he makes me feel strong, empowered.

Then, I tell her how Arrow reacted and how he walked out on me the second I told him my truth. I didn’t realize how good it would feel to get it all off my chest. But when I finish, and my mother gives me that soft look that only mothers can give, I feel a little better.

“He will come around, my love. If he truly cares for you then he will have to.”

She continues to encourage me and when she hangs up, the hurt comes back so fierce that I know I won’t survive it if he never comes back to me.

I need someone who I can talk this through with, someone who will understand all of it. So, I call on the one person I know would never judge me.



Chapter 41

My phone rings and I swear I have to crawl through a mountain of muscle to get it. Sleeping with three guys is great until you wake up and have to pee or answer your phone. No more falling asleep to playing solitaire or sudoku. Nope, I fall asleep in a sandwich of hot breaths and needy hands.

I'm not complaining about it, exactly. Just saying that sometimes a girl needs a little space.

"Everything okay?" Damien asks as he helps me roll over to grab the phone blaring on the nightstand. Lev and Alexi are still sleeping like rocks.

"I don't know." I see it's Laney then notice it's three in the morning. "It's Laney."

“Is someone in the house?” he asks, sitting up in a panic. I look at him and roll my eyes.

“Is someone in the house?” I ask as I hit the answer button, already knowing that line of thought is ridiculous.

A snuffle sounds. “Um, no?”

“Do I need to kill him?” My response puts Damien on full alert, but I lay my hand on his chest to stop him from waking the others. There’s only one person who could make her cry like that, and it looks like I’ll be chopping his balls off after all.

“Maybe.”

I’m moving before she even finishes the word because if she’s even thinking about it, that means he’s a dead man walking. I grab my blades from the nightstand and strap them to my thigh. Laney must understand my silence means I’m readying for battle. She stops me before I can open the door with Damien hot on my heels.

“Wait no. I mean no. Please don’t kill him. Can um, can we just talk?”

I look at Damien and he shakes his head, confirming he doesn’t plan on leaving me.

“I’m coming, but my guard dog is unfortunately coming too. Don’t worry, he will sit in the corner on a blanket.”

She laughs like I’m joking. I’m not. From the look Damien gives me as he rolls his shoulders, he’s ready for a night of sleeping in the corner. At least he understands. Such a good boy.

We enter Laney’s room to find her covers pulled up over her shoulders. I climb into bed with her immediately. Damien takes a seat in the recliner in the corner, throwing a blanket over himself and propping his feet up. I swear the man is snoring before his head even lays back. It makes me wonder why he came with me if he just plans on crashing in here. Men are so weird.

I ignore him while my teary-eyed friend faces me.

“What happened?” I ask, brushing back some of the hair that fell into her face.

“So, he basically said he wanted a life and kids with me, then I told him I didn’t want kids and he was fine with that but then...” She bites her lip.

“You can tell me anything,” I encourage her.

“Then I told him I wanted Havoc too and he freaked out. He just... he just left.”

Yup, he’s a dead man. Or, at the very least, a ball-less one.

Tears fall from her chin. I pull her close to me. This wasn’t what I wanted when I texted him. He was supposed to apologize and then be there for her. If he wasn’t man enough to accept she cared for more than one guy then he doesn’t deserve her.

I flick on the light next to her bed, figuring we’ll be up for a while. That’s when I see the fingerprints he left on her face.

“Laney?” I breathe, my anger palpable.

“What?” she questions, her eyes going wide. When she touches her face, wincing just slightly, I lose it.

My feet hit the floor before I have a chance to think. I don’t hear Laney yelling, and I sure as hell don’t expect Damien to stop me as quickly as he does.

“Were you even sleeping?” I snarl, pushing him back. He smirks like we’re just having a good time, only making my anger grow. He notices.

“What’s going on? Why are you about to run out of here in only my shirt with *that* look?”

I gesture to Laney, the fingerprints that were dug into her cheek very evident. “He hurt her.”

Damien’s jaw tightens as he takes in the small bruises forming next to her jaw. “Was that consensual?” he asks her.

“I didn’t tell him to stop.” Laney tries to play it off, but that’s not what we do here.

“Did you ever tell him that marking you was okay?” His tone is so gentle with her. I can’t help but think that Damien would make an amazing father. He can be so gentle and understanding when he needs to be.

“No.” Her lip trembles, and I can’t help but feel like we’re only making things worse. It’s not okay for him to do what he did, but she should get a say in what happens from here.

“Laney, did he do it out of anger?” I ask, needing more of the story.

“I don’t think he even knew he was doing it.” A tear falls down her cheek as she shakes her head.

I get back into bed with her because now isn’t the time for me to go on a one-woman revenge parade. Now is the time for me to be here for my friend. Damien bends down, making eye contact with her.

“I’m going to speak with him, but I won’t hurt him physically. Is that okay with you?”

She nods, and he gives me a look. He needs my approval to deal with this. I lift my chin to the door, letting him know he can go do his thing and I’ll do mine. My girl needs her friend, and I have to admit, a room full of pink and no sweaty men in sight is actually a nice little break from normal.



Chapter 42

I'm trying to rein in my anger. I told Laney I wouldn't hurt the man physically, but the kinds of mental shit I plan to do to him after seeing the bruises on her face will have to be good enough. It is never okay for a man to lose control. Especially like that.

I approach the teacher's housing on the far side of the island. My breathing is already coming in harsh pants. When I get to his door, I bang so hard I actually think I dent the metal in the storm door. Squinting in the moonlight, I can see that I did.

Arrow yanks open the door looking just like I do. Ready to pounce— to kill. I take a deep breath before making it very clear why I'm here.

“Did you know you left a mark on her?”

His head tilts in confusion. “A mark on who? Where?” I push past him and walk into his home, entering right into the living area. I sit on the couch so this feels less like it’s about to turn into a brawl because that’s not what either of us needs.

“Your girl’s face.” I can’t hide the sneer in my voice but I stay seated, trying to keep things civil, which is more than I can say for him.

“You’re lying, I barely touched her... I... Did you see it?”

I nod and watch as that realization takes him to his knees. When regret washes over his face, I let him sit there for a minute to take in what he did. Then, I speak.

“Acting out in anger like that is not only childish, it’s foolish. Your title is something you value here, so I understand why you don’t show your relationship outside our home. You want to trust us with your relationship and we want you to trust us.” I lean forward, leveling him with my glare.

“But I will make one thing very clear for you right here and now. You know who I am, you know what I do for our organization. If another mark ever appears on that girl by your hand that she did not openly consent to, I will not hesitate to string you up in my shed or the dungeons and skin you alive. Do you understand?”

He sits there frozen for a while. “I’ve never done that before. I never meant to...”

“From where I’m sitting, you have a choice to make. That girl loves you and wants to give you her heart, but she also loves someone else.”

Yeah, I was fake sleeping the whole time so that Laney felt more comfortable opening up to her friend while I listened for intruders.

His anger flares and I stand up, cracking my knuckles to let him know he doesn’t intimidate me.

“If you can’t swallow your pride enough to accept that, then you better walk away now and let her be happy with Havoc. You weren’t there during the break, but I saw that he helped her become stronger. Not just physically, but mentally too.”

I walk towards him, making sure he hears every word I'm about to say. "He helped teach her to believe in herself, showed her that being fake wasn't how she needed to be with us. She walks with more confidence now, openly speaks her mind, and even spoke up to you when she was sure it was going to break her heart."

I poke my finger in his chest to send the point home.

"You didn't see that, but I did. That girl is like a sister to me. I will not let you tear her down over something as simple and as stupid as *pride*."

"Really?" He shakes his head and moves to the couch across from me. I sit back down and wait for him to see reason.

"We mostly texted while she was gone, but I think you're right. She loved training and telling me about all her accomplishments. I hated it was him who got to make her feel that way, but I loved celebrating her milestones with her anyway."

He sighs, and I let the silence linger. I'm not normally a patient man. But when it comes to problems like this, I find reacting first and asking questions later is what leads to the problem to begin with.

"How do you do it?" he finally asks, looking almost defeated.

"I don't think you're ready to do it, man. You look too desperate."

"I am desperate, but I want her to be happy. I want her to actually have everything she wants."

I believe that he means that, but I don't know if he's actually ready to take that step. "Why do you think she needs him?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. Maybe because I'm not enough."

There it is. The age-old issue. Pride. Coming to life in its worst form.

“Do you think I’m not enough and that’s why Evie needs the three of us?”

He takes a minute to think about that. “No.”

“Then you see why she needs all of us, right? You see that she doesn’t have to split her heart into three pieces for us. All of us get the whole thing. And in turn, we help make her feel whole.”

I can see when it starts to make sense to him. He’s not all on board but his hackles aren’t raised in attack mode anymore. I stand up to leave, knowing my job here is done. He has the information he needs. Now it’s time for him to decide the kind of man he wants to be.

I just hope for his sake...he makes the right choice.



Laney

Arrow: I’m so sorry for hurting you, Kitten. It won’t happen again. I need some time to figure out what to do. For now, know that I care about you, and you did nothing wrong. I’ll find a way to make this all up to you.

As I read the message aloud to Evie, my heart begins to ache. In just one night, everything changed. Havoc messaged me last night to check in after Damien told him I was upset. I adore the man for intervening, but I also hate that I couldn’t handle it all on my own.

“Well, he’s right to apologize, although I’m not sure how he can make anything up to you. Short of having a threesome with Havoc, I don’t see how anything will be enough.”

I laugh as I shove her because laughing is better than crying at this point. It’s only been a day since everything happened, but I feel like it’s been a week from how sore my body is from all the tears and angry pillow launching.

Evie sat with me through all of it, but now it’s time to face the day. I’m not one to hide away from my problems, so for now, I plan to just be cordial with Arrow until he makes a

decision. Evie and my mother made it clear it's not fair for me to accept anything less than what I want, so I'm not going to. Until Arrow can figure his shit out, I can't be with him.

It doesn't make it hurt any less though.

Havoc: Good morning, my unicorn. Have an amazing day. Can't stop thinking about you.

I get out of bed with a smile on my face. He told me he was coming out here in a few weeks and couldn't wait to see me. I've only kissed the guy once, but I can't help feeling this pull to him. He may be old enough to be my father, at least I think he is, but I can't help how I feel despite that.

Not only is he crazy fit, but he makes my body come alive in a way I never expected. I was never trained in combat because my role was always to look small and weak. If I looked vulnerable, then people wouldn't take me seriously. If no one took me seriously, then I could get away with being privy to all sorts of information. They don't think I can speak seven languages. Everyone just assumes the hair and clothes are all I care about at the end of the day.

The dumb blonde act I put on as I got older only helped my position. I was able to go undercover at just sixteen to help my father steal back hundreds of acres of land, and the look just stuck.

It didn't hurt that I loved makeup and playing the part. I did excel in drama and arts classes, always able to jump into a new scene as someone totally different than before. It's always thrilling to create a new character to match the plot.

It was weird though. When it came to Havoc and Arrow, I didn't feel like I needed to pretend. Even if Arrow is being an ass, I don't feel like I need to pretend or fake anything just to get him to come back to me faster. If he wants to be by my side, the man has to earn it. And the only man earning my attention right now...is Havoc.

Laney: Hope you have a good day too. I can't wait to see you soon. x



Chapter 43

We have been planning everything in the three months since we got back to the island and it's all starting to feel complete. Evie and I meet at a room in the library twice a week in place of class to work on some coding and hacking as we discuss the way The Shades communicate when going in on a big job.

“I didn't get along well with others, so I didn't go on many group outings,” she says, leaning over her computer. Now that we have an official layout of the airport, we're working on plotting potential movements and ways to counter them.

“You? Not getting along with others? I can't imagine it.”

She laughs and I sit back smiling. I love getting to see her like this. She's in her element. If this woman had an army to command, there would be no stopping her. It's as beautiful as it is terrifying.

“I know right? I’m very friendly and agreeable.” She can hardly get the words out without giggling, causing me to snort at her.

We talk about the code names The Shades use. My plan is to memorize them as soon as I can hack into their comms and use it against them to move them around and get them to attack each other. They should already be assuming we will have ops on the ground, especially with the amount of illegal shit we are planning to transfer. So we have to be ready to deal with an army.

We will rig smoke bombs that I will trigger based on movements, making it hard to tell the enemy apart from their own men. Not only will it make them hesitate, but it will also help keep them unfocused while we direct them to where Arrow and Laney can pick them off.

Hours later, I can see the sun setting out the window. Evie doesn’t seem to notice, but I’ve seen her nervous to go to sleep lately. She will stay downstairs and clean the dishes two times if she has to. Sometimes, she and Damien don’t get back from the gym until the middle of the night, and she only seems ready to go to bed when her eyes can’t stay open any longer.

“Are you about ready to head back?” I ask her.

She looks at the clock and then outside. “I guess it is getting late.” She’s reluctant to pack up her stuff, and I can see her literally dragging her feet.

“Lucky Charm?” She looks at me, already knowing what I’m going to ask.

“That obvious?”

“I’m just trying to figure out if you’re wanting to avoid sleeping with us, or if you’re just avoiding sleep.”

She moves her foot in circles, looking at the ground.

“Just sleep.”

I move her bag off her shoulder and walk us to the couch in the suite we’re using for research.

“Care to tell me why?”

She sits down and gets comfortable. It takes her a few tries to figure out where she wants to be, but when she settles with her feet crossed sitting sideways to look at me, I see her straighten her spine.

“You don’t have to do that,” I tell her.

“Do what?” It actually makes my heart sad that she doesn’t see how she prepares herself for battle every time she talks about her emotions with us.

“Steel your spine like you’re pretending to be strong or unaffected. I already believe you’re strong, so just tell me what’s bothering you. You’re not weak just because you struggle.”

Evie takes a deep breath, her shoulders sag a little, and I see the moment she decides to open herself up. I want her to feel safe being vulnerable with me. I want to be here for her.

“I’ve talked to Dr. K about it. She just thinks I’m having some PTSD. Every night, when I think about getting into bed, I start to have anxiety about what waking up will look like.”

I must look confused because she tries to explain again.

“I know the night terrors haven’t been nearly as bad. I have maybe one a week now. But, apparently, because I spent years being traumatized in my sleep, I’m having a negative response to doing it now.”

That makes sense. I know PTSD can take many forms, and her night terrors have never been an easy thing to face. “Is there any way I can help?”

She smiles shyly. “No, but knowing you will be there when I wake up helps. Even if it’s a bad wake-up, having you guys brings me out of it quickly.”

I scoot closer to her and pull her into my lap so she’s straddling me. “I’m proud of you,” I tell her as I keep her body close to mine. “You’re so fucking strong, it’s incredible.”

“I don’t feel strong when I fear things like sleep.” She pulls me even closer, making it clear she needs this connection to feel grounded.

“We all fear things—it’s what we do with that fear that makes us who we are. If you run away from it, you’ll never stop running. But *you* choose to face it every time. I can see your talks with Dr. K are helping, and I’m so fucking glad you’re getting somewhere with her. But this isn’t an overnight fix, Lucky Charm. You’ll get there. Just have grace with yourself.”

I rub small circles on her back as we sit there in silence. I feel her accepting my words, but I also know this stuff takes time. I’ll say them over and over again until she believes them. My girl is strong, and there is nothing she can’t overcome.



Chapter 44

Teaching my girl tactical driving has been one of the most exciting parts of the past few months. It's out here that I can make sure Evie smiles and lets go of things. We're both adrenaline junkies by trade. So I know out here, I can give her everything she needs.

I race around the track, drifting through the final set of cones when a flash of red makes my heart nearly stop. I turn to watch as Evie drifts along with me, only inches from my car, and I'm able to make out the giant smile on her face. I've never tandem drifted with anyone before, but with her, it feels like the best sort of competition.

"Head to the drift track, Little Shadow. Show me what you've got," I say over the speakers in our helmets.

“Oh, I’ll show you what I’ve got, Sunshine. Just don’t be too devastated when I beat your ass.”

She cuts me off right as we enter the track and leads the race. She takes all the turns at high speeds, showing none of the reservations she had when we first started. She trusts her car. She moves with it as if it were an extension of herself. It’s hot as fuck to watch.

Our little competition doesn’t have judges to get the full four aspect score card, but I keep track of our angles and lines we set prior. We move in and out of the curves, using the straightaways to pick up as much speed as possible. Her movements are precise, and her throttle steering is nearly as impressive as watching most Formula D racers.

We get to the end and our cars come to a stop side by side. We are both clearly panting, but she races out of the car and over to mine. I’m just able to clear the door when she launches herself into my arms.

“That was incredible. I’ve never been so nervous and exhilarated at the same time before.” Her squeals of excitement have me spinning her in my arms. Seeing her this happy has been my goal every time we come out here. I feel like today is going to be extra special just for us.

“Are you ready for our date, Little Shadow?” I set her down, and we take off our helmets.

“You mean there’s more? I thought the driving was the date.” We toss our helmets in the car before I take her hand and pull her to me.

“What do you take me for? An amateur? Lev told me your date with him was your first. He set the bar pretty high, but I still think I can beat him.”

“Oh really?” I move us to the car hangar, and we enter through the back. There’s a large truck with blankets all piled in with this cheese board thing that to me looks like an adult lunchable, but the man in the dining hall suggested it so I went with it. I think he called it ‘shark coochies’ but maybe that isn’t right.

A large screen is set up with a projector, and my favorite movies of all time are lined up. The entire Fast and Furious collection isn't ever taken seriously by those in the real car community, but to me, they are classics. They made me believe there was a kind of freedom and family found in driving. I didn't have to learn it just because my father demanded it, but because I wanted the same thing these characters found in this sport.

I help her up into the truck and get us settled. I prop up pillows and blankets before starting the movie and feeding my girl cheese, meat, and a little bit of fruit. It's so hot watching her eat from between my fingers that only ten minutes in I'm ready to fuck her brainless.

Stop it. Down dog. I have to make this a real date.

I adjust myself carefully before looking back at Evie. "Hey, so I wanted to talk to you about some things."

I never use a serious tone, so the minute I do, she sits up and listens.

"I know you said you've forgiven me for the way I acted after we found out who you were, but I want to explain myself and give you a real apology."

"Damien, you don't have..." I cut her off.

"Please, Little Shadow. I need to do this, for both of us." She nods, so I move forward.

"You were the first person to ever get the story about my past. You're the only one who knows about all of my scars."

I take a deep breath as I feel the tears coming. I know I've told her a million times that this reaction is normal, but being vulnerable like this never feels good.

"When we found out you were keeping secrets, it felt like I relived all of those moments with my father again. I felt scared and trapped. When you told me I was just like all of the men who hurt you before, I was the only one in the room who really knew what that meant. At the time I was able to ignore it because my anger outweighed the guilt. But..."

My voice breaks as the first few tears race down my cheeks. Her hand wraps around mine and gives me the strength to keep pushing forward.

“But, those words still haunt me. I never want to remind you of those men. I never want to take from you like that again. I can’t bear the idea of you seeing me that way ever again.” My breath stutters as I sit there, waiting for her to respond.

My hair falls into my face as I look down at our hands. She combs it back with her fingers as she tilts my head to look at her.

“I was angry too, Sunshine. I wish every day that I could go back and change how things happened. But this isn’t a fairytale. There are no genies or fairy godmothers. We have to make our own special kind of magic in this world.”

“What magic is that?” I ask, my voice strained.

“Forgiveness.”

My lip trembles as I take her face in my hands, looking her in the eyes. The only thing I’ve craved, since I was a child who lost his mother, was a sense of belonging—a sense of family. And this girl gives me all of that. She’s not just my shadow because she’s good at hiding in the dark. She’s my little shadow because as long as I’m standing, my shadow is with me.

“Thank you,” I breathe. Her lips meet mine in a kiss that makes me believe every word she just said. We have to make our own kind of magic here, and I plan to make a lot of it with her.

The sound of cars taking off in the movie rings out around us. I lay her on her back below me.

“Let me earn that forgiveness then,” I say as I inch down her body. Her eyelids are hooded as they look down at me. She knows just what I can do to earn it. Sliding down her legs, I work off her pants then settle between her thighs, spreading them wide for me to get a good look at her glistening pussy.

“How long have you been this wet for me?” I ask her as I cup her center.

“Since the moment I met you in the drift.” Fuck, she’s already panting for me.

I add a little pressure with my hand to reward her for answering me. Her hips push into me, seeking more. I give it to her. This isn’t a scene, it’s not about me having control. This is for her.

Two fingers push into her heat, meeting no resistance. She clenches down, and I swear I nearly go cross-eyed with lust. I’m not even inside her yet and feel like I could blow in my pants like a damn teenager right now just feeling her around me.

I slide in and out then curl them at the same time I lick her from her ass to her clit. She moans in response, so I do it again. Her nails rake through my hair before pulling my face so hard into her, I swear I could suffocate.

Oh well, RIP I guess.

I suck her clit, flicking my tongue over the nub as it slides into my mouth. Her legs shake around me, clamping tight while she takes away my ability to hear her screams with her legs. I keep going until her body is nearly convulsing as her pussy quakes with her orgasm.

Her legs slowly fall away from my head, and when I come up for air, I see the most blissed-out look on her face.

“Did I earn it, Little Shadow?”

“Fuck. Yes.” She takes a breath between each word.

“Good, now I’m going to fuck you until you see stars. How’s that sound?”

“Hmm,” she hums. “But you forgot something.”

“What’s that?” I ask as I strip my clothes off, needing to feel her heat around me.

“I have some forgiveness to earn too.” I want to stop her and that thought process. She may have lied, but it was to try and protect herself, not to hurt me. It’s not the same. But my words are cut off by the look she levels me with. She needs this, just like I do.

“Okay, Little Shadow.” I sit back, fully naked, and she rolls on her stomach then turns around and *crawls* to me. Holy fuck. I’ve never been this hard before in my life. Her ass sways as she moves and gets between my legs.

Both her hands slide up my thighs before one wraps around my length and twists as she pumps. She leans in and sticks out her tongue, letting a line of spit falling from the tip of her tongue straight to the tip of my dick, and I groan at the sight as precum leaks out of me.

“Fuck yes, baby.” I buck up into her hand. She twists as she pumps and uses her spit as lube. As the spit begins to dry, I wait in anticipation to see her do it again, but she surprises me. Her free hand moves between her legs as she plays with herself.

I watch as she slides two fingers deep into her dripping center. I bite my lip, captivated and so fucking turned on. It takes all my willpower not to let go now.

She pulls her fingers free, then uses her slickness to coat my dick and continue pumping. I can smell her from here, the sweetness of her cum is still on my face, and I find myself licking my lips and craving the reminder.

“I want to taste you, baby.” Her head lifts just as she was moving to slide my dick between her lips, but I need her on my face right fucking now.

“But I want to taste you too.” Her pout is adorable.

“Well, good thing we can do both then, right?” I may have slowed down at the gym a bit lately, but I can lift my girl without much thought. So I sit up and flip her so she’s sitting on my face and her mouth is just hovering above my cock.

“Suck,” I command, lifting my hips. She hesitates for a moment, clearly not expecting this position.

Out of all the things we’ve done together, I’m a little surprised to think she hasn’t tried this one yet. I don’t let her get too into her head about it though. Grabbing her hips, I force her weight down until all I can feel is her.

Her chest presses to mine, the tight peaks of her nipples grazing my lower abdomen. I put us in this position, but I am not prepared for how good her mouth feels as she sucks me to the back of her throat.

I have never once been this distracted in the middle of a sixty-nine. I completely forget what I'm doing. My lungs forget to breathe as she swallows around me.

Her hips grind down, and that's when I remember I have a job to do here too. I get back to giving her glistening pussy my attention, pushing my tongue in as far as it will go and lapping up every drop of honeydew she gives me. She starts working her hand in tandem with sucking me, taking me in deep every fucking time.

I can feel myself getting closer to the edge with each stroke, and when she stops to tongue my slit, I suck in a harsh breath. I need her orgasm as much as I need mine right now.

Moving my hand around her ass, I spread it before pressing a finger to her tight hole. She squirms in my hold, but not to get away. She tries to push into me.

Such a good fucking girl, taking what I want to give her.

Slowly I push in, and the moment she relaxes, I tongue her pussy. I feel her clamp down when I'm in to the knuckle, and her orgasm follows.

Her cum coats my tongue at the same instance I feel myself spilling deep into her throat. She takes every drop, licking and sucking until I'm over-sensitive and have to pull her off.

I move her to lay beside me and brush her hair away from her face. Looking down at her, I run my finger over the mark I gave her the first time we had sex.

“I love you, Little Shadow.”

“I love you too, Sunshine.”



Chapter 45

I arrive on the island with the last of winter beginning to fade. It smells like spring is in the air, and I cannot wait to see Evie after all this time apart. I also can't wait to see the girl I can't seem to get out of my head. I'm convinced she really is some kind of magical creature with just how quickly she got me wrapped around her finger.

To my displeasure, I exit the plane to find Arrow waiting for me. My defenses are instantly raised. I called him after Damien told me about what happened between Arrow and Laney. She may have chosen him first, but I think she's starting to choose me too, and I will be damned if I let him get away with hurting her. Physically or mentally.

I walk down the runway towards him, and the man actually stretches out his hand to me. I shake it in a state of shock over

the one-eighty he has made since we talked. He gestures his chin for me to follow, and we finally step off the runway where I can hear him speak.

“I have an apology to make to you.” He stops us, turning on his heel and looking me in the eye. “I never gave you a fair shot and you didn’t deserve that. I’d like to start fresh today if that’s possible?”

Did not expect that. From the broken look on the poor guy’s face, I’d say Damien has given him enough hell for what he did.

It was her who asked me not to tackle him to the ground the moment I saw him. So it must also be because of her that I agree to a fresh start.

“That sounds good to me.” I clap the guy on the shoulder, keeping us walking. I know there’s an extra bedroom at the place Alexi had renovated for the group. My new room is right next to who I hope one day becomes my girl. So I might as well make nice with the other man who seems to have a piece of her heart.

I’m still trying to come to terms with the fact that I’m falling for a girl who is thirteen years younger than I am, but I’m too weak a man to ignore the temptation any longer. She’s made it clear what she wants, and I’m prepared to give her just that. I already lost someone I loved once because I alone couldn’t keep her safe. Maybe with Arrow in the mix, we stand a better chance this time.



After I get settled in and have breakfast with everyone, Evie and I meet for a workout together so we can catch up. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this girl so happy. At the compound, her defenses were always up. The only time she ever chose to let loose at all was if it was just the two of us on the mats together, and even then those moments were rare.

But here, it’s like she’s a totally different person. She laughs and jokes. She lets people touch her and returns their touches.

The joy on her face makes me so fucking proud. She's found her place in the world, and I'm beyond grateful to get to see it and be part of it.

I always knew she was a strong woman. Her anger issues aside, I had no doubt she would rule the organization someday. I truly wanted her to have everything even back then. I only wish I could have protected her better.

It wasn't until she killed the man in her room that I realized what some of the men had been doing at night. I doubled down our workouts after that and hired my own men to guard her door at night while she was none the wiser. Seeing that man's blood all over her, where it was and the look in her eyes, validated so many suspicions. I failed her in so many ways, but I would not fail her this time.

It's why Boris and I agreed to keep my other assignment on lockdown. These kids have enough to focus on right now, and if we happen to pull this off, we can let them in on it later.

I take the stairs to the roof of the training gym, knowing the ray of sunshine that lights up my darkened heart is going to be up there. When I open the door, she's all I see. Her golden hair blowing in the breeze. The smile she gives me is nothing short of a favor from the gods.

She squeals as she runs into my arms, launching herself around my neck. I squeeze her and spin, making her giggle. Setting her down, I pull back just enough so that our lips can touch. The moment she leans in, a piece of my being seems to settle into place.

"I missed you," she says as she pulls back. It's only then I see a very irritated-looking Arrow staring at us.

"I missed you too." I peck her cheek then get to business. I'll make sure she's spoiled later. For now, we need to figure out where their skill set is and help them learn to work as a team.

"Arrow," I say, nodding my head towards him.

"Havoc." He does the same, and Laney looks back and forth between us.

“Laney,” she says giggling and I look over to her with a smirk. “What? I thought we were stating our names for the class.”

I let out a bark of laughter and Arrow seems to relax a bit. We settle into a groove while I teach them about scouting. Arrow seems to have a good grasp on things but he leaves his back open when making bigger moves or transitions a lot. Laney catches on quickly, great at keeping low to avoid blows, but her drawback for the larger explosive arrows takes her longer to aim for, which leaves her open and vulnerable more often than I’d like.

I know I’ll be on the ground with Alexi, helping to trap Adrik between us and Evie and Damien. But I wish I could be up here, protecting her. *Protecting them.*

As much of an asshole the guy seems to be, I can tell Arrow loves Laney more than he cares about the air in his lungs. It’s the reason he’s always leaving his back open, to look at her, watch her, protect her.

I walk them through different ways to improve their weak spots. By the time we are done, the sun is starting to set and sweat is dripping down all of our faces.

“Well, I’m going to go shower,” Laney announces, and I could swear it sounded like an invitation.

She walks down the stairs in front of us, swaying her hips just a little bit. When we get to the main gym floor, she takes her time mingling with a few students before she grabs her bag and heads toward the house. It’s only when she turns back, and winks at us that I am positive it was indeed an invitation.

“Are we going to do this, brother?” I ask Arrow, who’s standing at my side. From the way he’s staring at her ass, I know he’s just as pussy whipped as I am. And I haven’t even gotten to fuck the girl.

“Do we need to come up with some kind of rules or system here?” he asks as we pick up our pace, not wanting our girl to think she can get away from us so quickly.

“My only rule is she gets what she wants no matter what. She wants you to suck my cock, I’m good with it, and vice versa. She wants us one at a time, great. Together? Fan-fucking-tastic. Think you can keep up, little boy?”

A challenge flares in his eyes. “I’m not little, but you’ll find that out soon enough.”

I wink at him. He will soon find out my dick contains eight magic little silver balls that make women go *feral*.



Chapter 46

“What supports are we going to use at the base of the planes to turn them into shelters?” I ask Boris over our video chat.

We’re finalizing all of the construction plans at the airport but also have to keep things hush-hush. We usually end up talking late at night his time while he’s at home to make sure no one can overhear. Not a single person in his organization, besides the ones now on the island, are aware that this whole plan is really a trap. I need everything to go smoothly over here and not just for Evie’s sake.

We might all be entering the trials as a team, but what we do as individuals matters. I don’t want the recognition for my father or for the Irish mafia. I want it for myself.

“They are planes, they already have support.” The patronizing way he looks at me is enough to amp up my

attitude.

“These ‘planes’ are supposed to be shelters any of us can use to seek cover in an open field against high-powered rifles and explosive devices. Please tell me how the standard three-wheel supports are going to prevent the entire aircraft from going down if hit with C4, old man.”

His jaw ticks. He hates when I call him that, but I honestly can’t help myself. I never thought I would have the opportunity to work with someone as successful in the underworld as he is. And now that we have a relationship he can’t walk away from, it’s even more fun to poke the bear.

“Once again, I am not old. I just turned fifty. I see your point with the plan though. The supports will need to be discrete.” He picks at his thumb with his index finger, the way he always does when he’s thinking.

“What if we secured the plane to the walkways that bring you from the plane to the building? That way not only do we create a shelter, but we further stabilize it while using it to be a floating point from the open field to inside the building only we have access to.”

He nods as he thinks. “What would prevent anyone from using it once they notice it’s a point of access?”

That’s a good point. I enjoy our relationship because of the open conversations we can have. Boris always tries to start them off as if he’s the smartest man in the room, but once I point out that’s not the case, the scenario at hand becomes a collaborative effort.

“We could use keycards to access the doors from the outside.”

His eyes grow wide, and I know we are about to formulate a solid plan.

“If they are on the outside, it would make it a stopping point. They would be sitting ducks. But, if we have the doors open at the start and they have a keycard on a necklace, then they could use that to shut the door automatically behind them.”

I applaud him, and he takes a mock bow. “And they say you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” I joke.

“Watch it, young lady, this old dog has a lot more reach than you. I could have someone kill you in your sleep anytime.”

“Nah,” I say with confidence as I flip through my tablet, scanning my notes. “You need me. I bring you too much joy to just get rid of me.”

He loves to threaten me anytime I get too snappy with him. At first, it intimidated me, but now I know Evie would kill the guy if he let anything happen to me. So, I take my liberties and have a free tongue with him.

“You bring me stress, Lisichka.”

Little fox. I love it when he calls me that. Russian is so beautiful.

I don’t acknowledge it though. Instead, I bring up our next point of concern.

“Alexi says you’re worried about the airport not being usable at the end of this. What does that mean?”

“I would like to preserve as much of the land and it’s assets as possible. If we can keep the damage to a minimum, I could actually use it as a fully functional airport in just a few months. The organization would really thrive with anew source of income.”

Wow, padre here has his eggs in the wrong basket with this one.

“Yeah, I think we are going to need to let that idea stop here.”

He mockingly chuckles. “Of course you would. I’m not in the business of buying airports and using them for land. I need an income to maintain our infrastructure.”

I raise my eyes from my tablet, having already marked off this idea. “Are you in the business of protecting your family?” I ask, knowing he needs a good old dose of reality at this moment.

“This is all being set up to make sure *your* son and the woman he loves can be safe. Hell, Adrik has gotten to you and your men multiple times already. Who knows what could happen when you have another mole we aren’t monitoring twenty-four-seven?” He closes his eyes in frustration, trying to get a grip, but I’m not finished.

“This isn’t a business transaction you can put in the books. This is *war*. This is life and death. Can we try to not place bombs in areas that will likely damage the infrastructure of the buildings? Sure. Will we not place any bombs on the property to keep the building standing and risk our team? Fuck no.”

His eyes flash with anger, but with it comes a wave of understanding. He can’t deny my point, so we move on.

“This all needs to be kept quiet. Not even your two hands should be aware of what we are really doing. Do you think our plan is still secure?”

He scoffs, waving his hand in anger. “Do you think I would risk my son and the woman he loves by choosing to gossip to my men like a schoolgirl?”

“Fair point,” I say, raising my hands in mock surrender. “Now that all of the main business is out of the way, I have a few questions for you.”

“Ask away.” He gestures with his hands then sits back in his seat seeming to relax.

“As you’re aware, I’ll be arriving in a week to help prep and set everything up with you. With the airport being not far from the city, I wanted to find a hotel there to stay at as well as get some of your dining opinions. I’ve not been to Russia before, so I need to know the lay of the land.”

His brows pinch. “Hotels?”

“Yes, I did not plan on sleeping in my rental car.” I’m having a hard time understanding where the confusion is for him here.

“You will be staying at my home with *me*. I have already had a room prepared for you as well as your dining choices

and a few of my personal favorites taken into account.” He picks up his planner and points to a few lines of text with an air of excitement. It’s like he can’t wait to show me around his world.

“There are two restaurants I planned to show you during your stay. One is more upscale and the other is a total shit hole, but I know the owner and he makes the most impressive array of pirog I have tasted, apart from the ones my late wife used to make. You will have no need of a hotel.”

My jaw nearly falls to the floor. I assumed I would be going solo unless we were performing actual business, but I feel like he’s taking this way more seriously than I am. It makes me feel special and seen, but also somewhat defensive.

“I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself for this trip.” My voice is harsher than I intended, but he seems unphased.

“Did I ever state you were incapable?” He tilts his head in question, so much like Alexi it freaks me out for a second. He acts like I’m the one being weird here. *I mean, I am definitely weird. But also, what the fuck?*

“Nooo,” I drag out the word solely to give myself time to think. “It feels like you are though.”

“I am simply taking my job seriously. You wanted this role to learn to lead, I can’t quite teach you how to do that simply over video calls. You’ll come with me to meetings and watch how I run my organization. You will be honest with me if you see something you perceive as a flaw, and we will analyze the issues together. This is what a leader does. We do not simply hand you the reins and smack the horse while leaving you to flounder about.”

I sit back in my seat now, shocked but also not at the same time. When he puts it like that, it seems a lot less like he’s doing it to keep me close so that I don’t fuck up. Something my father was always great at doing with me.

“Alright, I’ll see you in a week then.”

“Until then, Lisichka.” And with that, he signs off.



Chapter 47

I walk out to greet the car pulling into the drive. The familiar red hair quickly comes into view behind the glass. Her eyes take in my home with pure awe. Although, I have no idea why. Her father's house is nearly the same size, though lacking the sprawling estate. He prefers his house to be in the center of the town, using his people as a shield between him and any foreign enemy.

Coward.

I push aside thoughts of him as I approach the car and open Nessa's door for her. Her cheeks turn a tinge pink when she looks up at me. I'm guessing where she is from, chivalry is dead based on the gratitude she exudes here.

"Thank you," she says quietly. Her shy act is strange to me.

Just last week her witty remarks and jabs at my age were the only language I have come to understand from her. So the girl standing beside me, acting like she has no idea what her next move should be, catches me off guard.

“Come on in, I’ll show you your room so you can settle in.” I gesture towards the house.

When she moves to take the bag from the driver, I reach around her and take it for her. Ian’s eyes go wide with shock because I have never once done this. Not even for my own wife. The thought has me snapping to attention, trying to ignore the burning in my grip where her bag hangs, as I turn to the house and assume she will follow.

I open the front doors, not waiting for anyone else to do so for me. Which again, has me confused. I shake my head as I make our way to the north wing of the estate. I felt the room nearest mine would be fit for her, in case she required anything of course.

Opening the door and stepping in, I set her bag to the side. “I hope the room is to your usual standard.”

I watch every move her body makes as she takes in the space. Gold accents adorn the room with ivory linens. Her lips tilt up in a smirk I know all too well, and her posture has me relaxing knowing she feels comfortable.

“I guess it will do,” she walks across to the expansive bathroom with a balcony attached, the sunset glistening in the distance off of the water and the city in plain view. From there, I can see the tower from which I work. The tower I used to call my home until only recently.

I had a bath drawn for her upon her arrival. The water is filled with rose oil and lavender. I wasn’t sure the scents she would approve of but, being the constant observer I am, I was able to see her bath salts behind her one night as we talked and remembered the scent.

“There’s a warm bath waiting for you. Wash up and relax. Dinner will be served at eight, and I will come to get you at five till.”

She tosses her bag on the bed and looks at me over her shoulder. “Bossy much, Grandpa.”

I am so torn over her comment. On the one hand, I am glad to see her usual self standing there, not a hint of self-preservation or shyness on her person. Then, on the other hand, my palm burns to bend her over the bed and smack her ass until she ceases referring to me as old.

I grit my teeth. Instead of answering, I turn on my heels and excuse myself. This woman has no idea who she’s messing with.



Hours later, I return to her room and knock on her door. She walks out in a lilac-colored dress, her hair braided down her back in an intricate fashion. Her face is all natural except for a light brush of mascara. Her freckles are on full display across her nose and cheeks. Her scent is thoroughly intoxicating. I can smell the rose oil and a hint of something sweet. She’s a beautiful decoration and dessert all in one.

I, on the other hand, am in my gym clothes, shorts and a tank top that are tinged with sweat. I had no choice but to go work out the frustration gnawing at me since the moment I left her. I had only just realized the time when I was on my fourth round of cardio. My muscles were pumped, on full display, and she was staring.

“I see that dinner is not a formal event here. I’ll go and change real quick.” She picks up the hem of her dress and starts to turn.

“Don’t.” My tone is a demand, not a request. Gods, I don’t even recognize my own voice.

She turns on me so fast that there’s no way I could have seen it coming, even with my training.

“If you don’t want me to change, old man, then you have to. I look ridiculous. Anyone would assume I’m a whore who came here to try and seduce you. I don’t give a flying fuck that

your staff is sworn to silence about my visit and who I really am, that makes this look worse. So you change, or I will.”

She punctuates her last sentence with a finger jabbed in my chest, and I feel the threads of my control fraying. I take a deep breath.

“I will go and change then.” My response takes her by surprise. Five minutes later, I approach her outside her door in a suit.

“Better?” I ask, fully serious.

“Much, thank you.” I hold out my arm for her to take since we are now being formal. She takes it with the grace of a queen, and my skin holds that familiar burning wherever she touches.

Dinner is peaceful as we settle into casual conversation.

“If you’re not too tired when we wrap up here, I’ll take you to the airport. Since we only have five days before everyone arrives, I thought it would be good for you to see it at night since that is when the job will be taking place.”

“Sounds good to me, padre. Am I allowed to change for this venture?” she questions with an eyebrow raised. I love how she already knows to ask permission.

“You are,” I nod. “Let me walk you back to your room.”

Once we’ve changed and have gotten into my personal car headed to the airport, I start pointing out landmarks. She takes everything in with awe, and again, my confusion about her life deepens.

“Isn’t Ireland supposed to be like a fairyland? What is it about Moscow that has you so enthralled?”

“Ireland is beautiful, but my home doesn’t hold many fond memories for me anymore. The beauty has been tainted with unachievable expectations that have hung over me since the moment I could walk.”

She breathes out a sigh, and I let the silence linger. I never quite gained respect for the Irish mafia, but now that I’m

seeing how they treat their women firsthand, my dislike for them only grows.

“When I was ten, my father was training me to shoot on the property. We have rolling hills in our backyard, everything you picture when you think of Ireland.”

She looks out the window and blows out a long breath, keeping her focus trained out in the distance.

“One of my father’s men had betrayed him. I was tasked with eliminating him. I was ten. I couldn’t even hold the gun I was using in my own hands; my father had to carry it up the hill for me and set it up.”

She turns to look at me. I glance at her while keeping an eye on the road. “You know the spring in Ireland, where you see all the hills painted with beautiful flowers and blooms for days on end?”

“I do.”

“When I see them, all I picture is that man and the blood that coated all the flowers around him. It was my first time ever hitting a live target. I missed the mark by two inches. Do you know the things you can hit two inches from the apex of a man’s heart?”

“I do,” I say, this time seeing exactly where she’s going with the story.

“I hit the inside of his arm, the bullet going through his artery and spraying red everywhere as he flailed. My father forced me to count every second the man cried in agony because I missed. It took four minutes for him to bleed out. Four minutes for the landscape around him to be stained with his blood because I couldn’t hit my target. Four fucking minutes for a man to die in fear and agony. This man was forced to relive the mistake he made that turns out, wasn’t a mistake at all. My father made me kill the wrong man.”

She shakes her head, and I notice her hands trembling.

“What did he say when this happened?”

“He said that when you’re in this life, you accept your fate could be brutal. To expect any other kind of end was a fantasy.”

“How do you picture his end?”

A mischievous smile spreads across her face. “Twice as bloody as my first kill.”

“Good.” It is likely not a smart move to let her know that I wish her father dead, but it felt right to admit it to her.

We arrive at the airport and I show her around. The planes have been fitted as she expected, and we test out the new keycards. We run through a few scenarios and also go to both of the towers. I fitted one with all of the surveillance Lev could need and the other with the surveillance Nessa and I will use to help keep everyone in position.

From the windows, we can see where Laney and Arrow will be on the roof as well as the ground below them, so we can warn them of any unexpected attacks. The doors to the roof will be only accessible by keycard and have a failsafe lock should they be shot in an attempt to break through.

We go through the bunker Damien and Evie will be waiting in, which is also set up as a makeshift cell to hold Adrik, should we need to grab him while still taking down his team. When we arrive back at the car, a familiar silver Mercedes is waiting for us.

“Rostya?” I ask as the man removes himself from the car.

“It is odd that you’re here in the middle of the night, although now that I see you’re in the company of a woman, maybe I assumed wrong.”

“How did you know I was here, and what did you assume I was doing?”

Panic flares in my mind. Although I know my right hand to be trustworthy, the fact that he’s here when no one should be able to track me is a red flag. I narrow my eyes in suspicion.

“I knew you bought the property and we were getting close to shipment day. When I did not find you at home, I figured

you would be here, Pakhan.” He comes close and bows ever so slightly at the mention of my authority.

At least he knows to use my title in front of her. Nessa is stiff beside me. I place my hand on the small of her back to reassure her.

“This is Natalie,” I say, hoping she goes with the ruse. “She will be overseeing flight plans and needed to get a look at the towers before we set our next plans into motion.”

“I see, and the best time to check a runway would, of course, be the middle of the night.” He looks at Nessa suggestively and I don’t miss the disrespect in his tone. He’s not only questioning me but her also.

Nessa steps forward, holding out her hand to him and putting on a fake British accent. If I didn’t know her real voice, I would have easily believed it.

“I can assure you, Sir,” she shakes his hand, giving it a firm tug and taking him by surprise. I hold back the smirk dancing behind my lips at his lack of ability to maintain control under her gaze and hand.

“It is important to see where the planes will be in the day and evening hours. Functioning runways and safety plans are vital at all hours of the day. Planes do land in the dark, you know.”

Her education puts him on edge. “Besides,” she turns her back to him and looks at me, “I needed to see the towers to ensure the equipment was properly updated. My schedule as of late has been quite full. Boris so kindly made time for me this evening, but I was not aware he answered to another in this process.” She flicks her hair behind her then casually lays a hand on my arm.

Rostya stands taller at the idea of him being in charge. I inwardly mock him. He always craves to be the one in the room with the most power and has no idea how to handle it when that’s not him. With a grateful heart, I’m sure to remind him though.

“I do not answer to anyone. In fact, I’m still waiting to hear what it is you are doing here, Rostya?”

His jaw ticks as Nessa grows closer to my side, not in fear, but in a show of unity. I know in this moment Rostya feels every bit the tiny man he truly is.

“I was concerned about you being alone here at night with the area unguarded. Now that I see that’s not the case, I’ll be on my way.” He turns to leave, but not before Nessa gets in the last jab.

“The grown-ups do have business to discuss.”

She turns and heads towards the building as if we were about to actually go have a meeting. Rostya turns to her in fury. With his fists clenched, he steps to walk in her direction. I swiftly put myself in his path.

“You heard her,” I tell him. “I will not let you ruin a business deal of mine by acting like a fool in front of the person I need to grant us access to permits. Leave.”

His face turns mocking and as he leaves, he gives me the dumb two-finger salute I’m so used to seeing from his son. “As you wish, *sir*.”

I shake my head at his arrogance but choose to ignore it for now because I can smell the alcohol on his breath. I text one of our drivers to intercept him and take him home. If he’s willing to mock me, he’s not sober enough to be driving home.

I turn back to the building, figuring we will be up most of the night finalizing our plan so that she can call the rest of the team tomorrow.



Chapter 48

Five days. We only have five days before we leave for Russia again. Only seven days until we take down the man who ruined my life, who ruined so many people's lives. I take a shaky breath as I prepare myself to leave the bathroom, the place I've been hiding out in for the past fifteen minutes. Sometimes, when I don't want to talk, this is the only place I can actually get some space.

Dr. K has encouraged me to take space when I need it. To face my feelings and work through them so they don't control me. It's actually been helping me a lot. It's also a reminder of where I could have been mentally and how much stronger I could have been if I actually had real therapists helping me this entire time.

You can't change the past, so don't dwell on it. Facing something and letting something be the source of your anger are two different things. Focus on the present, look around at the things you can control, and remind yourself your past does not define you.

Dr. K's words filter through my mind and this time when I take a breath, the shaking stops. I grab the door handle and walk out, my three men standing there waiting for me.

"You ready, Little Shadow?" Damien approaches me, holding out his hand. I take it in my own, threading our fingers together.

"We got this... Right?"

"Fuck yeah, we do. But listen, I've been thinking." Damien glances around the room, his expression serious. "If we are going to do this, then we need to do it right."

"I agree, which is why we need a solid plan finalized today," Alexi says, walking ahead to open the door. Damien stops in his tracks, his brow furrowing.

"What? No, dude. We need code names. Like, really cool ones."

A laugh bursts from my lips. A full-blown belly laugh that I cannot keep contained. With all we're about to encounter, the look on Damien's face actually says that codenames are in the top three priorities.

I'm honestly afraid they even go above his own safety with how he's staring at me. I school my expression and do what I can to take him seriously. "What names did you have in mind, Sunshine?"

He eyes me for a moment then returns to his normal bubbly self. We are all standing by the door, ready to leave after Damien gets this off his chest. "Well, obviously Alexi is Daddy, and we all know Lev is Ghost. For myself, I was thinking Thor, you know because I'm basically a god."

I have to hold back another laugh, but I manage it.

“Nessa should be Fox because of her hair. Laney is clearly a Barbie so that name fits her perfectly. Boris would be Big Bear, because you know, Russia. Havoc looks like a Wolverine and Arrow is definitely a Magneto. So, that just leaves you.”

The way he’s thought about these names so much but hasn’t picked a name for me, actually makes me a little bit sad. He gave himself the name of the god of thunder but couldn’t find anything for me.

“That’s easy, she’s Princess.” Alexi takes my hand. The way he looks at me makes me think he knows exactly what’s going through my mind.

“She’s not a princess though,” Lev says, crowding behind me. “She’s a queen. Our queen.” Goosebumps travel down my body, and I lean back into his hold when his hands pull me close. “Isn’t that right?”

I smile as I nod. Damien doesn’t seem sold on the nickname but he had his chance. Alexi crowds my front, kissing my forehead then backs up to the door. “Are you ready then, my queen?”

I will never, and I mean never, say out loud what that thought does to my insides. But the image of me sitting on a throne with the three of them servicing their queen has my breath hitching.

Damien looks my way and chuckles. I have no doubt the man is reading my mind right now. I brush past them, needing to change the subject before we are all late for this meeting.

“Let’s go, boys. We have a villain to take down.”



We are all seated in the living area with Nessa and Boris on video chat. Laney and Arrow seem to be doing better, if the sight of her sitting on his lap is anything to go by. Havoc is sitting right next to them as well with her legs propped up on his thighs.

Man, if I didn’t call that the second I saw it.

“We have created points of shelter along the roof,” Nessa says, having been there with Boris to get everything ready. After countless hours together over the past few months, I’ve come to trust her as much as I trust Laney. The tracker my uncle had on me has been shared between the two of us in case I wanted some time away with the guys to avoid looking suspicious. Tonight, she’s taking it and keeping it here so that I can go on a surprise date with Alexi.

I have a feeling the date tonight is going to be something special. He’s been planning it for weeks according to Damien. I’ve been doing my best to split my time between all of the guys. Last week, we decided we should do weekly dates.

Damien went first and I have to say, riding around the track with him and then going for a midnight cruise with the help of Angelo was amazing. We turned the lights on under the yacht and even went swimming.

We got to see the endangered green turtle and then when some sharks came out to play, I quickly returned to the boat. I had enough enemies in the world. If I went down from anything, it would not be a fucking shark.

Damien, of course, stayed in just to toy with me and only got back on the boat when I started stripping and running back to his room. The man went feral and I loved every second of it.

Nessa grabs our attention to get started. “I added extra seals to the rooms in the airport in case we need to release the tear gas inside the building. All of the rooms should be sealed well enough that nothing toxic can get through. The ventilation shafts will be closed as well, which means it will be hot as shit indoors. So, unless you need cover, try to stay outside.” She really has thought of it all.

Boris takes over where she leaves off. “We have equipped both towers with state-of-the-art monitoring equipment. If we tell you that you need to move, it’s because we can see the threat looming before you can. This plan will not work without trust.”

He gives us a hard look as if we're all just children going on a silly little mission and not tactful mercenaries who have been well-trained for this exact moment. "Nessa, Lev, and I will be watching your backs. Trust us to tell you when to move and where."

"That reminds me," Damien interjects, "we need to tell everyone their code names!" The enthusiasm in his voice literally warms my heart. Who would have thought the trained torturer would be such a goofball? I adore him.

Everyone laughs at the names Damien came up with. Arrow and Havoc chuckle but seem to also glance at each other. Wolverine and Magneto were on opposite sides after all.

Laney loves her name and asks if she can be in full Barbie combat getup for the mission. Everyone loses it, but I have a strong feeling she is going to show up in just that. Slowly, the tension starts to bleed into the room. The seriousness of what's about to happen hitting us.

"You have one more call with Adrik, right?" Boris asks.

"Yes." I take a deep breath, willing the ache in my chest to go away. After this, he will be gone, but so will the last of my family. I know I've created my own family and the man clearly deserves to die, it's all just a lot to take in.

"I'll call him when we finish this here. I'm going to give him the time and place and tell him where to focus his efforts. We will need machinery running and false workers there for the beginning." I stand up to address the room.

"After that though, they will need to leave once his troops enter. Alexi is planning on having any members who are suspected traitors as well as the man we've been keeping under surveillance, Tamm, on the assembly machine from the entry point. This way the ruse is still believable. The only people who should die by my uncle's hand would be people who deserve it or people who are already working for him. It will be a win-win."

With that, the meeting comes to an end. My veins are buzzing, my palms sweating. Lev comes to my side, ready to

sit at my closet door while I make the call to my uncle. He's always there for me, and it helps settle the nausea that tries to burrow deep into me. Before we can reach the stairs, Alexi takes my hand and pulls me to him.

"Come to the cliffs when you're done. Take your time to process. I'll be waiting for you." He kisses me on the head and backs away.

My nerves go from anxious to excited in under a second. They all seem to know when I need to get out of my head. So when Alexi winks at me, all my nervous thoughts shatter until all I can picture is him lying out on the cliffs naked.

Holy fuck, rein in the horny bitch.

The excitement coursing through me should actually help the call I'm about to make. I *should* feel excited about the information I was finally able to get for him. It will help make everything more believable. As I run up the stairs to make the call, anxious to get to the cliffs for my date, I glance back down at him and smile. He knows exactly what he just did for me.

As we make it to my old room, I enter the closet and Lev stays outside. I didn't want the distraction of looking at him instead of the phone to be obvious. My uncle needs zero reason to be suspicious right now. I hurry and start the call, wanting to keep the adrenaline in my words.

"What do you have for me, Little Warrior?" I refuse to let him control my emotions, so I stamp down on all of the hatred and focus, getting into character.

"I've got it. The last piece to the puzzle."

He readies himself with a pen and paper. "You've got the date and time?"

I wink at him. "Did you ever doubt me?"

"Not for a moment."

"Good, you're going to want to write this down."

He's writing away as I give him the date and time, as well as the first wave of information that should have him moving

right where we want him.

“You got all of this in one night?” His questioning of me has my guard up instantly.

“I already told you, they left the door open when they were talking to Boris. I heard it all.”

“It seems very suspicious that they would just leave the door open for you to overhear.” His head tilts to the side, and I know I have to convince him to believe this.

“It helps that I’m sleeping with all of them. They think I’m in love with them.” I put on my most villainous smile. “They told me they were in love with me too.”

I hate bringing up my relationship with them and throwing it under the bus, but it seems to do what I was hoping for. We have had Laney telling him about me sneaking around with them and small details of dates and our relationships. We have had her send him pictures of us kissing. While I didn’t tell him anything about it other than mentioning that I slept with Alexi once. I was hoping if we needed a trump card we would be able to use this.

“Really?” he questions. “And *do you* love them?” I already knew he was going to ask this, but that doesn’t make the words I need to say out loud feel any less like glass in my throat.

“Fuck no,” I breathe. “They’re nothing to me. A means to an end.” My throat constricts as I hear movement on the other side of the door. My gaze tracks to it without my permission.

“Is someone there?” he asks in a low tone. I pretend to listen for a moment then shake my head at him.

“I don’t think so, but just to be safe, I should go. Let me know when it’s done. Don’t kill him. I want the honors for myself.” I repeat the words I told the team earlier. *This kill is mine.*

“You got it, Little Warrior, talk soon. I love you.”

“Love you,” I say quickly, hitting the end button before he can realize just how much I want to vomit over those words.

But it's over.

This is it. After this, I never have to do another video call again. I won't be speaking to him until he's close enough that his blood can coat my blades.

After this, I'm free.



Chapter 49

I've thought this through a million times at this point. There's a blanket, wine, and all of her favorite snacks. The weather is perfect with the moon rising in the background and the warm breeze carrying the scent of the ocean all the way up to us. This is one of her favorite places, and I wanted to make it even more special for her.

I finish setting everything up and realize I forgot the wine glasses. I'm in a state of panic, so deep I don't even hear her as she approaches. I look up to see the most stunning creature wearing a midnight black thigh-length dress that sparkles as she moves. She looks like the night sky herself and slowly, the panic in my chest subsides.

"Are you alright?" she asks, kneeling down on the blanket and ignoring everything around us. Her eyes lock on mine as

she assesses the fear gripping me.

“I... I forgot the glasses.”

Realization dawns on her face as she looks around us. The uncorked bottle I was letting breathe is sitting next to the basket of all the foods that make her moan in the same way she does when I sink into her perfect cunt.

“Alexi, this is beautiful.” She sits back, making her hair fall behind her shoulders.

She looks like the goddess of the night and she alone would be enough to save my damned soul. But the worry is still there.

“I ruined it,” I say as I move to stand up, but she takes my hand and pulls me back to her side.

“You didn’t ruin anything.” Suddenly, she straddles my lap and begins unbuttoning my shirt. As her soft touches land on my skin, part of the panic starts to ease.

“You don’t want to eat first?” In all the time I’ve known her, food has always come first to this one. Almost as if she doesn’t eat the second she’s hungry, the food will disappear before her eyes. Yet, right now, her eyes are only on me.

“Oh, I plan on eating. I just want an appetizer first,” she says with a wink and a teasing, agonizingly slow rock of her hips that rubs her pussy across my cock.

That has me rock hard beneath her in a second. She continues to unbutton my white formal shirt and pushes it off my shoulders. Evie takes her time removing each hand from the sleeves, and I watch her with bated breath, loving how her fingers roam over every curve of muscle on display. When she’s done, she folds my shirt carefully, making my heart expand for her even more.

I might be willing to throw a shirt here and there, but she knows what speaks to me in these moments. What ensures I can enjoy them the most is when I know even during crazy animalistic sex that my things are in order. She carefully places it in the basket on the empty side from where I removed the blanket and does the same with my pants.

Only once I'm down to my boxers and nothing else, does she stop to look at me. "Do you care if these get dirty?" she asks, pointing to the tented fabric that is doing very little to cover my dick at this point. I shake my head then she points to the blanket. Again, I shake my head.

"Good."

She straddles my lap again, grabbing the bottle of wine. Her warm heat surrounds me, but I don't know what she's about to do with the wine.

"I forgot the glasses," I say again. The shame of not being fully prepared laces my words.

"Tell me, Batman, where was your marker with spit play?"

A shiver races down my spine as it clicks what she's thinking. "Green."

"In that case, I don't think you forgot anything." She grabs my jaw. "Open."

I do as she commands, even though the Dominant in me wants to flip us over and pin her down. Except, I want to see what happens when I give her the reins—if only for a minute or two.

She puts the bottle to her lips and I cringe internally. The only reason I was able to drink from the bottle before was because so many people were watching me. Here and now, the thought makes me actually want to vomit.

Yet, when she takes a swig and holds it in, then leans over my open mouth, letting the wine fall from her lips onto my waiting tongue, a guttural moan escapes me.

The taste of her saliva mixed with the oaky wine I love so much coats my tongue, and I can't help but dig my fingers into her hips and pull her closer to me. Her thin dress slips up. It's at that exact moment that I realize she's not wearing anything underneath.

Her taut nipples press against my chest through the thin fabric at the same moment her dripping center skates over the

exposed side of my cock. My hips buck up into her, only to be met with resistance from the last piece of clothing I'm in.

She leans back to take another swig and swallows, then fills her mouth again. Her lips meet mine in a kiss, and I'm sucking what she has in her mouth into mine. It's so unbelievably dirty and sexy. I'm torn between taking us back to the house for a shower and fucking her right here.

This wasn't what I had planned for her though. I had a sweet date where we actually ate and talked. Not just sex. Even though I did plan for that in the end. I guess we are just going to have to mix things up. I don't enjoy my plans changing, but I don't want her to stop. So, instead of telling her no, I take back control.

Fisting my hand in her hair, I yank back, pulling her lips from mine. Evie's big, glassy eyes, with her pupils blown wide, look back at me. I take the bottle from her and pour it down her neck only for me to lap it back up.

She moans as my lips skate down her body, sucking, licking, and nipping with my teeth. Pulling off her dress, I set it carefully over the basket. The moment she's bare, I pour more wine down her body and chase it all the way down to the peak of her nipple with my tongue.

"Fuck yes," she breathes as I suck her into my mouth. She rocks her hips over me, chasing her pleasure. The tension is captivating, so much so that I'm afraid I might blow before I stick my cock inside of her, and that will simply not do.

In an instant, I have us flipped and lay her on her back, carefully lowering her head so that it doesn't hit the rocks the same way her back just did. The blanket took some of the blow, but I can see it didn't take it all from how she tries to arch off of the ground.

"I thought you liked a little pain, Princess."

A challenge flares in her eyes, and I crush our lips together again, setting the bottle above her head for later. I work my way down her body, kissing and sucking away any trace

remnants of the wine left there and when I reach her dripping center, I pause.

“I want to hear you scream for me, Princess. Got it? I want to hear exactly how I make you feel.”

“Yes, Daddy.” Her cheeks are flushed pink even in the moonlight. I’m slightly disappointed I won’t be able to see her face when she comes for me like this because of how deep I plan for my tongue to be in her pussy. I make a mental note to record this at some point so I can see the exact face she makes for me.

For now, I swipe my tongue between her folds and circle her clit slowly, torturing her in the same way she did me just moments ago when she was rocking her cunt in my lap.

Her body is writhing, pushing into me for more. But we are going at my pace. I spank the inside of her thigh, and she cries out. I suck her clit into my mouth and pop off quickly.

“Stay still and let Daddy take care of you, or you’ll get another.”

She nods, and I look down to see the skin I just slapped already turning pink right by her tattoo. I press a gentle kiss to it before going back to her pussy. I rim her walls with my tongue and her hips thrust up involuntarily. Another smack on the opposite side lands. She screams as a flood of arousal drips from her at the impact.

My Princess doesn't just like a little pain. She craves it.

I continue feasting, keeping her on the brink for as long as I want to. She’s sweating now, her body slick under my palm as I move up to pinch her nipple, never neglecting her swollen nub. She moans and screams, obeying like such a good girl. That is, until her hands grab my head, forcing me to give her more.

I pull back instantly. Before she can register it, I land a swift slap right to her glistening clit. Shock and pleasure ripple through her and her back arches off the ground. “Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

I watch in rapture as she pants beneath me, then I land another smack right to the same spot just before sliding two fingers into her wet pussy. The screams she lets out are of pure bliss, like a symphony of pleasure.

Evie's pussy grips my fingers like a vise as I pump in and out of her, dragging out the pleasure while my eyes drink in every second of her orgasm. As she comes down, her breathing starts to slow. Then, she looks me right in the eyes.

“Fuck me, Daddy, please?”

It's a beg, a plea, and I'm helpless to not give my good little princess exactly what she wants.

I slide out of my boxers as quickly as I can manage, then line myself up with her entrance. I push inside slowly. Her mouth falls open with a gasp as my forearm braces my weight above her head. I pull out, then slide back in at an unhurried pace. Dragging out both of our pleasure as I soak in the feeling of her walls clinging so tight around me.

Her face pinches in pain, and I know the rocks are likely causing bruises at this point. I flip us, staying fully seated inside of her. When she's stable on top, I help her sit up a bit, then we begin to move. She gasps as she slides down, taking every fucking inch of me.

It takes mere seconds for me to be ready to fill her up. I roll my hips, meeting her thrust for thrust as she undulates her body in such a hypnotic rhythm that it has me seeing stars. Then, I place my thumb on her clit and begin rubbing tight and fast circles. Just as she cries out, I pinch her nipple with my other hand to enhance her already brimming pleasure.

Her walls contract around me, milking me, begging me to come with her just like her words begged me to fuck her. And again, I'm helpless to not to give her what she needs. I come with a roar, pumping so hard and so deep that my shoulders dig into the rocks, cutting and scraping, but I don't fucking care. Not when my only focus is burying my cum so deep in her it's never able to come back out again.

She rides out her release, gazing down at me, then falls into my chest. “Thank you, Daddy,” she breathes.

“I love you, Princess.”

She sits up, her eyes glistening in the moonlight.

“I love you too. So fucking much.” She sounds as if she might cry, but then her lips are on mine, and my dick grows hard inside her again.

We continue to fuck until we come undone together for a second time and my girl finally looks sated beneath me. Only then do I pull out.

She grabs some napkins from the basket and cleans up, against my wishes but I don’t want her to be uncomfortable out here. I help her get dressed in my shirt and then put on my pants. I get her set up with snacks and some water.

“Eat, baby girl, and hydrate,” I command. She bites her lip and I groan. *How does she do this to me?*

I watch her obey me like the good girl she is. As she looks out over the ocean, the waves and the night sky seem to mirror everything about her. I know why this is her favorite spot. It’s chaotic with the sharp rocks below and the raging sea, while also peaceful with the moon shining as bright as the sun. It’s the perfect mirror image of her soul.

“Do you remember the first time I called you princess?” I ask, running my fingers through her hair as she sits between my legs, curled into me.

“When we were nine? Yes, I do actually. In fact, when you first called me that here, I was nervous you remembered me.”

“I think a part of me did.” I remember looking into her eyes that first day and seeing something in her.

If I looked hard enough I’m sure my mind forced me to look away from the idea that she was the girl I once thought I would marry. “Do you remember what you asked me after I called you that?”

“I don’t think I do,” she says, sitting up and looking at me. I immediately miss her warmth, but her position works better

for what I'm about to do.

“You asked me if I would still want to dance with you even if you weren't a real princess, and I told you that it didn't matter because to me, you were my Princess.”

I lean back into the picnic basket and pull out a small box. She stares at me, then glances between the box and me for a minute. Her brows pinch in confusion and I know she probably assumed I'd be the last person to do this. But we all decided it was fair.

“I was wondering...would you like to be my Princess—forever?”

Tilting the lid back for her, I move myself to one knee. “Will you marry me, Evie?”

It's one of the very few times I've ever used her name, but I want her to know that she is the person I want to marry. Not the woman my father chose for me, not the woman I met at that ball, but the one right here and now. Evie James.

She takes in a sharp breath, her hand going to her chest as tears well up and twinkle in her eyes.

“But...” she starts, and I already know where she's going with it.

“The guys and I have already talked about this. We know it's all of us or none of us. This ring is from us all, I just made sure I had it before I actually asked you the question.”

I smile and she lets out a strained laugh. My heart is racing with anticipation. The worry that she might not really want this from me settles deep into my gut no matter how strongly I attempt to convince myself that it's unfounded.

“I thought it was a joke, something said in the heat of the moment.” Her face looks pale, but I assumed shock might be her first reaction. When she was in the hospital, I told her I never planned to marry anyone, but I could hardly deny her anything in this world. If she wanted this with my brothers, then I wanted this with her too.

“Does this look like something said in the heat of the moment?” I ask her, taking the ring out and holding it to her.

Three halo diamonds sit across a twisted silver band. Sapphires surround one, rubies another, and emeralds surround the third. The three of us.

“No,” she laughs, “it sure doesn’t seem that way now.”

“What’s your answer, Princess? I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes,” she says, her silver eyes looking right through me and stitching the remnants of my soul back together.

She is ours, mine, and I will spend the rest of my life making sure she is happy. I take the ring from her hand and slide it on her finger, then pull her into me for a kiss that feels like fireworks.

My girl. My princess. Mine. Forever.



Chapter 50

He's probably proposing right now. Yup, we let him do this and now we just have to sit here and wait to see what she says. I shake out my hands as I pace the room, deep in thought. Will she say no? Will she think this was all a joke? A bunch of crazy kids caught up in the moment?

I mean, that's kind of what it was at first, but now, I don't know how we could make her see we were more serious. We spent weeks debating over the ring and all the specifications. Alexi called three different jewelers and the third one only ended up working because Lev found a way to 3D print exactly what we wanted.

I don't even hear my phone go off until Lev grabs my arm. "D, look at your email."

“Why the fuck would I be checking my email right now?” I throw my arms wide and he laughs.

“Look who just adjusted her limits list.” He holds the phone up for me to see and I grab it out of his hand.

Spit play has been changed from yellow to green for EJ

Clit spanking has been changed from orange to green for EJ

Thigh spanking has been changed from yellow to green for EJ

Excitement zaps through me faster than an e-stim rod and I get a wicked idea. Lev stares at me, seeing where my head is going.

“Want to help me set up a scene for our girl?” I ask him.

“Fuck yes!” He nearly falls off the bed in his attempt to jump up and I immediately send him to the toy box in my closet while I grab a few things from the bathroom and run downstairs to the kitchen after a brief glance at Evie’s list to refresh my memory.

As if every fucking word wasn’t already glued to the inside of my brain.

I run upstairs with everything we need and begin setting up. We are about to take our girls list of yellow and turn it into a big green... Avocado? *No, ew, avocados are gross. What else is green?*

Oh yeah, a giant bed of clovers.

Evie told me a few months back that most of her list was yellow because she hasn’t tried many things. She also opened up about Lev being one of the first people she ever slept with consensually. She is worried about her limits but wants to try everything at least once.

If her mind was easily changed about three things already, I’m sure we could bring the tally up to six more if Lev and I worked together. I look around and count, only coming up with five new things for her to try, until my eyes land on Lev.

“Get the tattoo gun. Set it up, I have an idea.”

He eyes me warily but listens like the good boy I know he is. Once everything is ready I shoot a text to Alexi who tells me they are headed back. He's already gotten his time with her so he can wait. It's our turn to celebrate. I mean, I'm assuming Alexi would have told me if she said no.

Oh sweet Poseidon's dick, he would have told me right?

All thoughts are shoved to the side when I see them come into view. Evie is running, Alexi hot on her heels when he catches her mere feet from the doorstep and throws her into his arms, carrying her inside like a bride-to-be. The moment I see the ring on her finger I can't help myself. I nearly fall over my own two feet rushing to her and taking her from his arms.

"You said yes?" I ask, spinning her in circles while she continues to laugh.

Lev walks down the stairs behind us and takes Evie's hand, looking at the massive ring on her finger.

"Of course I said yes, I want all of you, forever."

"Forever," Lev says as he kisses her fingers and I kiss her lips.

"We are going to need some space, Daddy Lex," I say over my shoulder as I begin carrying Evie up to our room.

"I'll shower in my old room while you three celebrate," he says, taking the second-floor exit off the stairs.

"Wait," Evie says, climbing out of my arms and running to him. His arms are open the second she reaches him and their lips collide. He pulls her close as he devours her face and I watch in awe, glee, and a bit of annoyance because I want to get to my turn.

"I love you," she says when he breaks the kiss.

"I love you too, now" he smacks her ass, "go to them before they kill me for keeping you to myself for so long."

She smiles at that, running to Lev and kissing him. He lifts her in his arms and finishes the job I started. We walk through the door, the room set up with towels on the bed, a suspension bar above it, ice, and the tattoo kit set up to the side.

“Holy shit,” Evie says, taking it all in. There are equal parts lust and fear on her face.

“You remember your safe word baby? If anything goes too far you call it. Anything.” I kiss her, trying to help calm her nerves. “We just want to show you all the possibilities tonight. Just like your Daddy.”

She bites her lip and if she touched me right now I swear I would come in my pants. Thank sweet baby Lucifer that Lev is already tying her hands behind her back. I move to the dresser and pick up two special pieces of jewelry for her while Lev tears her dress off of her.

“Sorry, Lucky Charm, it was in my way.” He smirks at her and she melts into him, kissing him while his hands roam over her beautiful skin.

Her back is red, likely from fucking Alexi out on the cliffs, and a zap of arousal goes straight to my dick as I think about what they got up to under the moonlight. Did she scream for him when he spanked her clit? Did she arch her back in pleasure as he spit in her mouth? Or did she spit in his?

Fuck I'm going to need all of these details later.

I move to her breasts, cupping them in my hands and massaging them. I put them in my mouth, sucking and nipping at them until they become tight buds begging for pressure. When I pop off, she whimpers.

“It’s okay Little Shadow. We are going to make them feel good.” I raise the shiny nipple clamp for her to see, not wanting her to be afraid of what I have planned. She needs to see it before she can trust it. She may have said yes to these before, but I don’t think surprising her with much is a good idea.

Evie gives me a nod while Lev kisses down her neck and she arches her back, pushing her tits up even more and giving me better access. I flick one and she shudders. “Such a good fucking girl for us, aren’t you.”

“Yes, sir, only for you.”

If I wasn't already hard, her breathy tone and those words would have had me turning to steel in seconds. I place one of the clamps on her left breast and slowly increase the pressure. I don't push them all the way, planning to work up to that.

"Shit that feels good," she pants, so I add another to the right breast. Jewels hang from them and I give them a little pull just to see her reaction. She gasps then rolls her hips, seeking friction.

I pick her up, her hands tied behind her back and I put her on the bed propped up on a bunch of pillows. Lev slides in behind her, keeping her upright so she can watch what I'm about to do. Her heels are just on the end of the bed, her body spread wide for me.

"Will you let me worship you, Little Shadow?"

Her pupils dilate even more as she breathes, "Yes, please."

I get on my knees for her, wanting to repay her for every time she's done the same for me, then I start slow.

I take her foot in my hand and press gentle kisses all the way up to her ankle. I feel goosebumps pebble over her skin and love how she squirms the closer I move to her center.

"You're so fucking perfect." *Kiss*. "Your skin." *Kiss*. "Your smile." *Kiss*. "How wet you are for us," I growl as I bite the inside of her thigh that's tinged pink with a handprint.

"Is she wet for us, baby?" I look up to Lev and he moves his hands from where they are cupping her breasts down to her center. He slides a finger up her pussy, then uses two to part her open for me.

"See for yourself, sir," he says, his voice dripping with pure desire.

Evie squirms in his hold, the vulnerability making her seem uncomfortable.

"What's your color?" I ask her, making sure we aren't taking this too far.

I don't know all the things she's been subjected to. If she's been given bad thoughts about her body I want to strike them

down. If she's been splayed out and vulnerable she might not feel ready to try this with us, and I want to remind her it's a safe space to tell us so.

"Yellow," she says in a weak voice.

Lev moves his fingers away and I kiss her thigh, right over her tattoo as I feel the bumps of scars beneath my fingertips. I keep kissing until I reach her core. Needing to know where she's at now I ask again.

"Yellow." Her voice nearly breaks so I close her legs, grab a blanket and Lev undoes her restraints. A good Dom rarely makes their sub use their safeword, and I'm not about to do that tonight.

Tears fall from her eyes and I instantly regret going so fast. Lev wraps his arms around her and kisses her forehead while I cover her with a blanket.

"You did so good baby," I say as I sit down and rub her back.

"No. I didn't." She shuts down on us, her face going hard and passive and I grab her chin.

"You will not do that. Not here. Certainly not with us. You called yellow and I cut the scene because I'm not taking you to red. If you want to try again tonight, we stop here and talk about it. This is supposed to be a night that we celebrate you saying yes to being ours. I will not start that off by betraying your trust. Got it?"

Her eyes flare with defiance and the vulnerable state she was in before vanishes.

"Got it," she says through clenched teeth.

Lev moves my hand from her face and turns her toward him. "We stop when things go too far, we stop because we respect you. We stop because we love you."

"I know," she says, her shoulders sagging. "Can we try again, please?"

"In a few minutes. Want to tell us what made you feel that way?" Lev brushes her hair back and holds her close while I

keep rubbing her back.

“It’s stupid,” she scoffs.

“It’s still valid,” I remind her.

She sits up, taking space and we give it to her, knowing she can’t think if we are touching her.

“When I talked to my uncle earlier...” Her words fade out and we give her time to compose her thoughts.

“I had to tell him I hated you. That I was only using you. I had to tell him that you guys didn’t mean anything to me. I know we talked about it, but I hated the words and how they made me feel. When you got on your knees for me just now, I felt dirty, like I didn’t deserve you this way after I just said that only hours ago.”

She puts her face in her hands. Lev reaches out, pulling her back into him first, and then we settle her between us as we lay down.

“It wasn’t real, Little Shadow. You said those things because you had to. We still love you.”

“I know,” her breath shudders. “I think maybe I just needed to get it off my chest. When Alexi asked me for all of you, that thought kept running through my mind and it seems I could only push it out for so long.”

I tilt her head to me and kiss her.

“You deserve this,” Lev whispers in her ear as he kisses down her neck.

“You deserve everything we give you,” I affirm as my hand trails down her stomach and cups her core. She rocks her hips into me, the hesitation from earlier fading away.

“Do you want to keep going?” I ask as my finger slides over her slit, she’s still soaked.

Lev’s hand touches mine and when she nods we both sink our fingers into her. Her hips thrust in time as moans fall from her lips. I can feel her getting close. Lev moves his other hand to her chest and we both tug on the nipple clamps.

“Fuck, Ghost, Sunshine. I’m so close.” I look over at Lev and lean in to kiss him.

Evie watches us closely, her walls tightening at the sight of us loving each other while loving her too. Lev moves his fingers out and she whimpers at the loss until I know he’s pressing on her tight hole. Her body stiffens, but I pick up the pace, curling my fingers while rubbing a thumb over her clit.

When she relaxes, Lev pushes in. I can feel the pressure build. And when he starts moving, she comes for us. Her scream is beautiful as she gasps and writhes between us and we work her up for more.

When we remove our fingers she slides onto her back, breathless.

“That was just the beginning, Lucky Charm. Are you ready for more?” Lev spreads her legs wide and I get off the bed and grab the ice.

“Do you want to try something new?” I ask her as I get close to her on the bed.

“Yes,” she gasps as she threads her fingers into Lev’s white hair, pulling him closer and riding his face.

“Open.” I place a piece of ice in her mouth when she obeys. I lean in to kiss her and pull the ice from her mouth with my tongue. Pushing the ice to the front of my mouth, I trail it down her neck, over her nipples still taught in the clamps, and down her stomach. As if Lev knew where I was headed he sits up and takes the ice from my mouth and brings it right to her clit.

It’s only a small cube, but when he flattens his tongue against her clit with the ice on the front she starts shaking.

“How’s that feel?” I ask her.

“So... so fucking good.”

“Look at our good girl,” I tell Lev, “taking everything we give her like a good little slut.” He hums around her clit and her hips buck up, frantically searching for that release.

I fist his hair and pull him back, not ready for her to come yet. Pulling Lev's face to mine, I kiss him while removing his shirt and shorts. He does the same for me. Evie has herself propped up on her arms and I look down at her between us.

"Ready for more?" I ask.

"Yes, sir."

"Lev, ropes." I take her hand in mine, moving her on the bed so that I can start tying her in a harness. "If this is too much at any point I have safety scissors in the drawer. If anything goes numb or hurts beyond something pleasurable I want you to tell me, okay?"

I start the harness over her chest, making an intricate five-pointed star before moving to the bodice next. Line after line of rope tied like a corset around her begins to form as I take my time touching her, helping her get into her subspace.

She starts to relax, even when I loop the rope between her legs, brushing over her clit, she stays calm and moveable for me.

"How do you feel baby?" I ask her as I let my fingers trail up and down the body harness I created for her.

She looks amazing in nothing but black rope and nipple clamps. I take a mental picture of the art I created, never wanting to forget this moment of trust. I bring Lev to her side and he starts wrapping her legs so they are bent and spread open for us.

He's been learning about the knots lately and I can tell the moment he slips into his subspace. His movements go from jerky to smooth as he ties the knots as if it were as simple as breathing. I stroke my hand through Evie's hair, keeping her calm and letting her know she's cherished, especially wrapped up like a present just for us.

I can't stop myself from peppering kisses down her skin, over her breasts. I pull on the clamps as I suck one into my mouth and remove it, then I do the same with the other. She moans in my ear so I massage her perfect tits, loving how each one fits into my hand so perfectly.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Little Shadow.”

With hooded eyes, she watches me appreciate every curve and kiss every visible scar. She deserves to know she’s beautiful. And perfect. A goddess among us—a Queen.

When Lev finishes with her legs, he sits back on his heels, the picture of perfect obedience.

“Do you want to try suspension? We want to take you. Both of us. Do you trust us?”

I give her the time to answer, making sure to keep my hands to myself until she’s sure she’s ready for this.

“I trust you, I want to try it.”

That’s all I need to grab the final ropes. Lev lifts her from the bed and I tie the final knots on the suspension bar to keep her hovering in the air for us, legs wide, her arms secured at her side on the harness.

“How’s it feel?” I ask as she adjusts to being held up by the ropes. The knots around her legs attach to the bar and should make her feel as if she’s simply kneeling in mid-air.

“Good, touch me, please.” she’s only hovering a foot off the bed but it’s enough I can get on all fours and lick her from ass to clit. She tries to rock into it but is bound too tight.

“Let’s show her how we reward our good girl,” I tell Lev, handing him some lube from the nightstand. He pours a generous amount on his cock, his piercing glinting in the light. I turn her to face him and leverage her so that she’s tilted forward slightly, giving me better access.

“Rub her clit with your piercing,” I order him.

My obedient boy does as he’s told and Evie arches into the feeling as best she can. While she’s distracted, I take the lube and add some to my hand before wrapping it around my cock. I know I’m big, but my girl can take it. I coat my fingers and then look over her shoulder at Lev.

“Give it to her, slowly.”

“Yes, sir.” Great Athena above if these two only knew just what that does to me.

Lev starts fucking her and I praise her from behind, whispering in her ear just how good she is while I finger her ass. When she starts pushing back as much as she can on three fingers, I know she’s ready. I line myself up with her, but she tenses.

“Relax for me baby,” I say as I palm her ass, massaging it. “Let me in like the good girl you are. Do you want to be my good girl?”

She starts to pant, pushing back slightly but still clearly anxious. I reach into the nightstand beside me, making sure my cock stays right where I want it while I grab her a distraction.

I hand Lev a little silver toy and without instruction, he turns on the bullet and puts it right on Evie’s clit while he continues to rock into her. Instantly, her muscles relax and I’m able to slip the crown of my dick inside her tight-as-hell ass.

“Oh fuck, so full,” she pants, nearly breathless.

I can feel her ass grip me, my cock pushing right up against Lev’s as he works inside her. The thought that we can have each other at the same time that we can have her has tingles already building at the base of my spine.

“Do you want us to fill you up?” I ask.

“Do you want us to release our cum so deep inside you that you can never get rid of us?” Lev questions.

“Yes, oh fuck please, please.”

“Only because you said please.” I thrust all the way in and she gasps as Lev and I find a perfect rhythm with each other.

Her walls try to milk us on the first orgasm but I’m no one pump chump. I grit my teeth and then suck on her neck, biting and building her back up as Lev kisses her mouth. I pull back and Lev and I lock eyes.

She’s close, and there’s one final thing I want to try. I nod at him and the moment our girl starts to come, screaming our

name, we each bite down on her shoulder and come with her.

Our bite is hard enough to leave a mark, but not enough to break skin. The moment we are done I pull the release tie on her legs and they fall to the bed, then I begin to remove her harness. Lev gets her a warm cloth and reluctantly cleans her up, making sure to be gentle with her ass.

Evie is limp on the bed now, nearly falling asleep.

“Are you okay, Little Shadow?” I ask her as I lay down beside her and Lev moves his tattoo equipment close.

“I’m great,” she says, her grin one of someone who is high. I love how we make her feel.

“Want to try one more thing?”

She throws an arm over her eyes and then pulls it back down. “What else could we possibly do?”

Oh my sweet sweet naive little shadow, so so much more is waiting for you.

“You put down being marked as green. Does that include permanently?”

She glances at the tattoo equipment. “Like with your names? That’s kinda cliché right?”

I laugh and so does Lev. “It is,” he says. “So, we came up with another idea.” He grabs a purple pen and points to the bite marks we left on her. “What if we made these permanent?”

She tilts her head to the side thinking when a huge grin spreads across her face. “Can you make them red?”

“Fuck yeah,” Lev says, bringing the pen to her shoulder and starting to mark over the imprints of our teeth.

He sets everything up and Evie seems to remember the pain of the last tattoo when the buzzing starts. “Want me to help keep you distracted?” I ask her, threading her fingers with mine. She’s still naked on the bed, her body damp with sweat.

“That would be amazing, but how are you going to do that?”

“Oh my darling girl, you forget just how wicked I can be.” I move down her body as she tenses in pain, her eyes tracking my movements. “You have to sit still now, can you do that?”

“Yes.” I spread her legs and slap the inside of her thigh.

“What was that?”

“Yes, sir. Fuck. Damien just touch me.”

I give her what she wants, my tongue parting her folds and paying close attention to her clit. I hear the buzzing pause, as if the gun is in mid-air and look up to see Lev very distracted.

“Think you can finish both marks before I make her come?”

“Challenge accepted,” He says, moving the needle back to her skin and staying focused.

I dive between her legs again and she comes just as Lev finishes the final stroke of his needle. I look at our girl, the picture of satisfaction, and I smirk at him. “I think it was a tie.”

“Only because you know I won.”

“You both,” Evie pants, “won.” She takes a few deep breaths. “Someone please help me to the shower so I can crash in this bed for the next twenty-four hours.”

We laugh as we get her cleaned up. When she gets back in bed, I hand her the phone with her limits list open.

“Do you need to make some adjustments?”

She punches me in the arm, way harder than I expected by the way, and then gets to adjusting. Soon we all get a notification.

Nipple clamps has been changed from yellow to green for EJ

Cold sensation play has been changed from yellow to green for EJ

Worship has been changed from yellow to green for EJ

Permanent marking/scarification has been changed from yellow to green for EJ

Suspension bondage has been changed from orange to green for EJ

DP has been changed from orange to green for EJ

Less than a minute later, Alexi walks in the door, pushing me out of the way and snuggling close to our girl.

“It’s not a competition assholes,” he murmurs as Evie’s nearly passed out form cuddles close to him.

It’s not, but if it were, we would have just won ourselves a trophy.



Chapter 51

I'm awoken early on the morning that we are supposed to leave for Russia by a shaking feeling beside me. Evie is trembling, sweat beading on her brow, and she's hyperventilating. One glance around shows Damien on the other end of the bed and Alexi missing.

I pull Evie into my arms and whisper sweet things in her ear, bringing her from the nightmare back to the present, back to me.

"Ghost," she says as she finally lets the reality of me being here set in. "That was so different from normal."

"What do you mean?" I whisper.

"It wasn't a dream about my past." She releases a shuddering breath. "I had a nightmare that we failed and that

he got you, all of you.”

“Impossible,” I say in a Damien voice and she huffs out a small chuckle. “But really, we are here, we got you. If we all die out there then at least we are together.”

“I don’t want you to die because of my revenge. I just promised to be yours, I want to keep you forever.”

“Forever is as long as we make it. How have you been doing with Dr. K?”

She sighs, melting into my hold. I tuck her into me, hoping we can get back to sleep. “She’s actually helping a lot. I think being able to find the subspace with you guys has been helping me find a sense of meditative calm. I text her a lot and she’s great about answering. She hasn’t once made me feel uncomfortable and I have been coping a lot better because of her.”

I try to look at her. “Why do I sense a ‘but’ coming?”

She laughs under her breath. “There’s not a but, it’s just...” I give her a moment to find her words. “I don’t like video chats and I don’t like the idea of talking in person. Texting feels safe. It’s something I almost never did with any other therapist and it gives me time to think about my replies.”

“Is she pushing you to talk to her differently?” Dr. K hasn’t been one to push Damien into anything that I’ve been aware of.

“No.”

“Then what’s bothering you?”

She shrugs her shoulders under my arms. “I guess it doesn’t feel official if we aren’t actually talking. I feel like I’m failing to do something right.”

I push back some of the hair sticking to her face, loving the way the silver shines in my fingers under the moonlight. “We all have to find our own ways to cope, to heal. Don’t think that yours is any less legitimate because of a standard you created in your mind.”

She shakes her head. “Why is that so easy for you? To just accept you are how you are?”

“Am I supposed to be anyone different?”

“No, it’s just, I feel like I’ve spent my whole life chasing the next mission and when I talk to her I feel like I should be chasing the next achievement. It’s just so different. I don’t always feel better after we talk, I have to work on things and learn to push through and it just feels like it’s all taking forever just because I don’t want to actually talk to her.”

“It’s a normal thing for healing to take time. Stop being so hard on yourself and look at how far you’ve come in just a few months. This time last year you never would have thought you could sleep for eight hours in a night and now you do almost five days a week. That’s fucking huge.”

“But...”

I press my finger to her lips. “No more buts.”

She sighs and scoots in even closer to me. “Would you stay out of this if you knew that it ended badly?”

“No. You’re mine to fight for.”

“What about the others?”

A voice from the chair in the corner of the room speaks up, startling both of us. “I may have given you your freedom, Princess. But just like you get to choose who stands by you, we get to choose who and what we put our lives on the line for. We will never let you go. You’re ours. Till the very end.” Alexi stands then gets into the bed beside me.

“Till the very end,” I echo and she nods.

“Till the very end.”

The finality in the words increases my anxiety for this trip, but I choose not to dwell on it. If this is where we all die, then so be it.



Chapter 52

The flight back to Russia was intense. I don't think there was a moment where one of my guys wasn't touching me or where Arrow and Havoc weren't fighting over who got to have Laney sleeping on their lap. It wasn't until Damien slapped the both of them over the head that they got her situated between them without waking her.

Havoc keeps going through the notes on his phone, giving us bits of last-minute information that he thinks might help. I know he's anxious about this and I don't blame him. We know everything Adrik is capable of. He's one of the few people on the planet we are both actually afraid of.

I toss and turn in the bed, going from being too hot to too cold, and then just downright frustrated. Eventually all of my

men fall asleep, but I can't seem to shake this feeling that we are missing something.

One more day. We only have one more day to prepare.

My mind starts to overthink everything. Is this something we should be doing? Should we just run instead? Is this worth risking all of them, their lives, just for my freedom?

I get out of bed and wander around the large mansion, eventually finding my way to the back kitchen. The lights are off except for some candles lit at the table. I make my way into the room, wondering who would have left candles burning unattended like that when a loud sound comes from the walk-in freezer.

The handle jiggles, and then a bang hits the door. I quickly run over to it, assuming the cook got himself caught or something. When I pull open the door I see Boris hovered over an intercom, a large tub of ice cream under his arm.

"Never mind," he says.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

"I needed something sweet and the door got jammed on me again. I had to have this damn intercom installed in here just so no one froze to death after the last incident."

"Oh fuck, did someone die in there?" I ask, throwing a hand over my chest. I'm no stranger to death, but the idea of someone innocent freezing to death in there has my chest hurting.

"No no no, they just got a little bit of frostbite. Their fingers ended up being okay though. Well, for the most part." I shiver at his words and promptly step away from the freezer with a reminder that not even ice cream would be worth that.

Boris pulls out a bowl then looks back at me.

"Do you want to join me? I feel that I may owe you after you just saved my life back there."

Okay, who was this man and what has he done with the ruthless mafia father I'd been coming to know? I mean, sure,

he's been sweet to me. But making jokes and eating ice cream feels weird. It feels... normal.

I think back to Alexi and how he's actually really good at throwing in a random joke here and there that always gets everyone in the room. This makes sense now, actually.

"Want to hear a story about Alexi as a child?" I know an olive branch when I see one, and he really is trying. I pull out a chair with a mischievous grin on my face.

"More than you will ever know, but I want the good stories, Papa Bear. None of the sweet sappy stuff. I need dirt on these boys."

He slides a bowl of ice cream in front of me, a grin on his face. "I'll give you enough that you can bury them."



I'm crying, sobbing hysterical tears of laughter rolling down my face as Boris imitates what Alexi looked like trying to get out of a giant mud pit of his own creation. Apparently, the boys thought the best way to evade the enemy was to trap themselves on the only island not made of mud and got stuck out in the heat all day. They were all three so sunburnt the family doctor had to prescribe them a special lotion to help.

"He looked like a little lobster for a week, it was quite pitiful."

He keeps talking and I hold up my hand begging him to stop because I might actually pee my pants. The last thing I ever expected in my life was to be sitting here with this man in the middle of the night and finding this type of joy.

He continues to tell stories about Alexi and the boys, as well as some stories about my father. It's been such a long time since I let myself think about him. I share some of the good memories with him too.

"He loved finding new hobbies to explore with me. We would get an idea and then do all this research by watching how-to videos and collecting all the gear. Sure enough, every

time we would be into it for three to six months then we would be selling the gear and moving on to the next thing.”

I smile as I think back to the time my father thought we would be outdoorsmen. Living off the land and fending for ourselves. We didn’t even last three days that time.

Boris chuckles, setting down his spoon to lean in. “Want to know a secret?”

“Always.”

“When your father was younger, he was afraid of accidentally sleepwalking. We saw this scary movie about a man who was murdered in his sleep by his sleepwalking wife. Ever since, he was terrified he would hurt someone by accident while sleepwalking.”

“I never knew that.”

“He was so paranoid about it he invested in these mats that would trigger an alarm if he got out of bed at night. One night, he got up to pee and didn’t think about it and the second his feet touched the mats the alarm went off and your father peed the bed.”

My ice cream nearly shoots out of my mouth. I swear some of it even gets into my lungs as I choke while laughing so hard there is no way my face isn’t blue.

Boris laughs with me, his face bright red and I find myself learning to love him in a way I never thought I’d be able to love someone again. My love for Havoc has always been easy, but he’s more like a brother to me. I haven’t loved someone like I loved my father since the day my life was changed.

I may have lost my father, but Boris looks at me the same way he used to. He looks at me the same way he looks at Alexi. I believe that we can pull this off because now I’ve got my family at my side, and we aren’t going down without a fight.



Alexi

I woke up cold and instantly knew Evie wasn't there. It's a strange feeling to wake up without her because it hasn't happened in months. My arms itch to reach out and pull her into me and try to get more sleep before everything starts. We have one day left to make this all work the way we have planned.

We are going to the airport tonight to do a quick run-through of movements and check the tech to make sure it all works for us. Our comms will have trackers in them along with our bracelets in the hope that if someone is taken they will find one and ignore the other.

I don't think there's an outcome we haven't planned for, even death. The guys and I talked a few nights ago and decided we would each write some letters to be handed out in case anything happened.

Putting into words how I feel on paper for Evie was difficult. I am not typically an emotional being. I know and understand anger, but the other things are not something I deal with on a daily basis. So, I was very surprised to find my eyes glassy at more than one point in writing it.

We gave them to my father just in case and he filed them in his office, assuring me they would get to the right people should anything happen to him as well. My gut turns, unease settling into me as I get out of bed and go search for my girl.

When she's not in the gym, the tension starts to build. I go back and check her room thinking maybe she needed some space to get her mind right. But then I see the bed is untouched and the lights are out. That is when I start to panic. I get out my phone to text her as I make it to the garage and see all the cars and bikes are there.

Where the fuck are you princess?

I'm about to call security when I hear laughter coming from the kitchen. I peek around the corner and my eyes don't process what I'm seeing. Evie and my father are... laughing.

I stay there in stunned silence, listening to them when eventually I hear he's telling all of my most embarrassing

stories.

Great, the last thing this brat needs is more ammo on us.

Though I pretend I'm annoyed in my head for the sake of my pride, I can't help but stay and listen. I love every giggle he is able to get out of her and every chuckle she gets from him. I haven't heard my dad truly laugh like this since my mother was alive.

A pang hits my heart, and I begin to wonder if someone put something in the wine with everything I've been feeling lately. I can't help but picture my mother in there with them, telling stories and being sure to tell Evie to give me hell.

Damien comes into view looking just as confused as I'm sure I did and Lev isn't far behind. We don't interrupt them though, we just take the time to listen to our girl's laughter. I didn't know if I would be able to really let my father back in after all this time. But, if he keeps making Evie laugh like that, I just might have to forgive him.



Chapter 53

“Gear up. Cars move out in ten.” Alexi’s voice rings through the garage as we all start putting on our tactical gear. Bulletproof vests, combat boots, Kevlar lined pants. I add two straps to the outside of my pants and put three knives on each side. My hands shake, but I keep moving, knowing that if I stop I’ll start to regret every move that led us to this point. Every move *I* set into motion.

“Come with me, I forgot something.” Damien tugs my hand just as I finish strapping up my boots.

“What could you have forgotten?” I ask as I hurry after him.

We turn the corner and he pushes me up against the wall, his thigh moving between my legs to pin me there as he grabs my hands and holds them above my head.

“This,” he says right before he collides his lips with mine. The sensation is like a volcano erupting and my legs go weak for this man. The building anxiety bleeds out of my limbs as he consumes me.

He takes my hand in his, pulling us back toward the garage the moment he breaks the kiss. My fingers touch my lips that are now tingly with the feeling of him.

“I love you,” I tell him before we leave the house.

“I love you most, Little Shadow.” He kisses my forehead before he opens the door and I see my other guys waiting for me by the car. As I walk towards them, headlights illuminate them from behind and a strange silver car pulls up.

Something catches my attention and I stare at the man who gets out of the car as an awful realization unfolds before me.

“What are you doing here, Rostya?” Boris asks the man as he approaches. He embraces him in a hug and my gut churns. The man moves around the car and our gazes lock. Cold eyes assess me, then just as fast as they came, he’s moving away. Tossing his arm around Boris he walks away, but not without a glance back at the rest of us.

It can’t be him. *Why would he be here?* Nothing makes sense. Every muscle in my body goes tight, the anxiety that was just washed away comes back tenfold. I know those eyes, that cocky grin, the sure way he saunters down the drive.

I was sure my eyes were playing tricks on me, but the moment I hear his voice I know for certain. “Control your anger, my friend. It could be the death of you.”

He looks at me right then, almost as if he wants me to know who he is, and what he did, as he says those words.

“You need to leave,” Boris tells him through a tight expression. The man nods and heads back to his car. As quickly as he came, he’s gone, but my whole world was just turned upside down a-fucking-gain.

My shock and train of thought are cut off when Damien picks me up and forces me into the car. I don’t register a single

thing around me. My body is in a state of total shock. *Who is he? Why was he here? How did he know Boris?*

I try to remember what I heard him say to my parents before he pulled the trigger on them but things aren't adding up.

"Why do you think your dad was here?" Alexi asks Damien and my brows furrow.

"Your dad?" I ask, my voice shaking.

"I have no idea, we don't talk. We haven't since the car shipment went missing."

Damien sits back in his seat and our car makes it to the airport just as my mind catches up with what I just saw. I know that man; his face lives in so many of my nightmares. His words still echo in my head. His voice sounds the same as it had when he pulled the trigger that changed the trajectory of my life.

Damien's dad killed my parents.



Chapter 54

We arrive at the airport just after Alexi's team and go straight to the tower. I park the car and move around to open the door for Nessa. Rostya's visit is still weighing on me, making me feel like something isn't quite right.

"You alright?" Nessa asks as we make it to the observation deck where all of our equipment is set up.

"Just distracted. I'll let it go so we can focus now though."

And I do, I push all thoughts to the side and focus on protecting the girl my son loves, the girl he and his closest friends plan to marry. Even though that idea is odd to me, I can truly see that they are all happy, and I want to help create a life for them that they can truly enjoy.

For that, she needs to be free. For that, I need to make sure that tonight goes down without a hitch. I pull up the cameras and look out over the view. The workers we planned to be here to make this operation happen are scarce, many having not shown up for the evening's events. It should make me wonder but I check all the cameras again and not a thing looks out of place.

"Area is clear, move in to set trigger bombs," I order over the comms to Alexi and Havoc.

The sound of two bike engines roar past us and right to the front of the airport taxiway. They cross over and begin setting charges and trigger bombs in front of the planes we have set up as shelters and shooting points.

Evie's bike comes around the corner as she parks it right outside of the old mechanics storage area we converted into a safe house. Damien brings his car right next to her bike and I watch as they get inside.

I look at Nessa as she gets her area set up. Her high-powered rifle sits in the window with a large scope screwed to the top. She has the new handgun I got her strapped to her thigh and a pair of brass knuckles secured to her side.

Nessa begins instructing everyone on their position and how she plans to direct them to their target. Lev comes over the comms and confirms his tracking is lining up to where everyone is exactly. Arrow and Laney are headed to the east stairwell to get on the rooftop we set up for them.

I look to the other tower, seeing Lev give a thumbs up to indicate his monitors are all booted up and working. Now that I know we have eyes on everyone we should be able to start this smoothly. Adrik should approach from the north and give us time to lure him back across the trigger bombs.

I use a spotting scope to scan the runway. An eerie fog starts to set in as I scan our people and a weird feeling prickles at my senses. Like we are being watched.

I look down and see Alexi and Havoc setting up the final bombs. All they have left is to set the trigger points from

where the team should enter.

My senses continue to tell me something is off so I scan the area. There are no surrounding buildings that are tall enough to have an advantage over us. The only building close enough for a sniper is off in the distance by a long shot.

I turn my attention back to Alexi when a strange light reflection catches my eye on that building.

Once, twice, three times. Then, gunfire erupts right next to my son.



Chapter 55

I notice a strange light reflecting in the distance as Alexi sets up the trigger. A dense fog seems to be settling into the area, which doesn't help us see where we need to go. But Boris has his eyes on us, so I stick to my assignment. I'm doing what I can to focus on the task at hand and not on the events of last night when I feel it.

I turn to look out into the distance as gunfire erupts, bullets spraying in my and Alexi's direction. I grab his head push him down to take cover behind our first shield on the plane.

I look around with my gun in my hand. Alexi is already grabbing the ones strapped to his chest. I activate a bomb in my hand. It should explode on contact so all I need is for them to get close.

How the fuck did they know we were here? They should have come in from the north. They always approach from the north then split the team into threes.

“Where are they moving?” I ask over the comms. Lev’s voice responds.

“They are splitting into 4 groups. Two surrounding you now. You need to move.”

“I’ll cover us,” I tell Alexi, knowing E would kill me if I let something happen to him. I push out and take aim, getting two of the eight targets that come into view. Alexi picks off one as we round the stairs to get into the plane for cover. We race inside then swipe the key to lock the door behind us.

We have no time to waste now. I move to the front, Alexi moves to the back, and we both take up positions in the windows fitted with small holes for us to use our rifles out of.

Five targets are left and I’m able to pick off one.

“Four left,” I call out.

Two shots ring out. “Two left,” he calls back.

I scan the area, not finding anyone. “Do you have eyes?”

“If I had eyes, I’d be shooting.”

Two of the workers we planted seem to have gotten caught in the crossfire, one of them the traitor we had been keeping under surveillance, but I don’t see the final two Shades anywhere.

“Lev, can anyone see them?” I continue to scan the area, not wanting to let my guard down.

“Thermal scanners aren’t picking up any more targets.”

I know I counted right. Where could they have gone? Realization dawns on me, but I don’t know if I’m too late. I move my scope to scan the roof, looking for my unicorn and her protector.

“The other two teams are advancing now. Does anyone have eyes on the target?” Lev asks.

I take a minute to think. Four teams plus them having the advantage. *What would be his move?*



“Around the corner. We will take two teams to send in as the inner circle, while the other two surround the outer area.” Adrik guides me on our first mission with him in charge. He’s fallen into the leader role much faster than expected.

“Do we have a fifth team coming in as a final wave?” I question, and he turns back to me with a cocksure grin.

“The fifth team is already here.”

“You really have thought of everything, my friend.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice. I’ve waited a long time to be at the top, and I don’t plan on fucking it up. Now, are you ready to make some bastards pay?”

“Let’s go, brother.”



I swipe my key at the door, knowing I need to get to the roof to protect Laney and Arrow. I look back at the direction everyone approached.

“One heat signature heading your way.” But I don’t need Lev when I can see the shadow of the man I used to call my closest friend striding toward us. Boris and I had been so careful. E was so careful. *How did he know we were lying? How did he know what we were planning here?*

When he’s close enough, I’m able to make out his smile. The same cocky smile that used to get me excited out on jobs. The same smile he would give his prey right before he shot them in the head.

This was all a fucking trap.



Chapter 56

Arrow and I make our way up the stairs to the roof when he confesses he doesn't know if he can share me. Of all the things you're *not* supposed to say to someone before a literal war starts outside, I think that should be in the top three.

Instead of finishing the conversation, gunfire erupts outside and we both look at each other, knowing something is off.

"What the heck?" I yell as we run up the stairs as quickly as we can. I move to check out what is happening when Arrow grabs me by the arm and pulls me into a kiss.

"I can't live without him too," I tell him, hoping he will understand.

"I know, Kitten. I won't make you choose. Now, let's go kill some Shades."

Is it wrong that the look he gives me in the name of murder gets me just as excited as it turns me on? If it is, then I'm not sure I want to be right. I am a criminal after all.

He nods to me as he heads toward the north-facing shield, and I go to the west. When the view opens up, I see Havoc and Alexi make it into the bunker just as two teams spread wide to take fire. They clearly don't see that the plane is a prop that's actually a bunker equipped with guns.

They take up their positions on either side of the plane while Arrow and I start firing from above. We each take down a target when Havoc and Alexi come out of the plane. A single figure seems to approach in the distance and I know without a doubt in my mind who he is.

Adrik.

My body freezes in fear, the adrenaline doing nothing to keep my mind from racing when I set my sights on the man who threatened me and my family. The man who made me hurt one of my only friends. The man who thought he could control me and make me his secret weapon.

Gunfire rings out behind us as they approach the bunker Damien and Evie are in. Dread pools in my stomach. No communications are getting out and I don't know where we should be focusing our efforts as I watch a new team approach and go into the building on the east end. Havoc jumps on his bike and Alexi does the same.

I don't want to lock the doors just in case we can get another man up here. I take out the long-range rifle and scan the buildings in the distance. There aren't many close to us, but if they knew this was a trap there are a few places someone could be lying in wait.

I see a figure tucking himself behind the luggage cart near the doors by the east building. His black combat boots come into view so I signal for Arrow to come to my side.

"What do you see?" he asks.

"There's a man behind the cart over there. I can hit his foot. If I get him to move out from the shelter, can you get him?"

He takes a moment to ready himself, notching an arrow and drawing back. I fire the moment I hear him pull in a breath.

The Shade jumps and falls out from behind the cart the moment my bullet goes through his shoe. An arrow releases, embedding itself straight through the man's neck. I refuse to look at the blood. Instead I look up at the man who works so well with me, the one who I think I'm in love with.

I don't know what changed between last night and tonight to make him question our dynamic, but I can't help but feel my heart ache as I accept that he's not ready for this. For me.

I look back at the tower to see Nessa scoping with her rifle. She makes a hand signal toward me but I can't make out what she's saying. I turn my scope on her just in time to see her signal when the comms open up.

"Sniper on the roof." The sound of a bullet rings out, and the impact changes the course of my life in an instant.



Chapter 57

I have the long-range rifle set up out the window and I'm moving it to try to get Laney's attention on the roof. I can see her talking to Arrow after they took down the Shade hiding below, but what she doesn't know is there's a sniper locked on them. I don't know what else I can do.

When I finally catch her eye, I try again to signal. Her scope peers up at me and when I signal again, Lev is able to break through the comms just as I yell, "Sniper on the roof!"

I see it when it clicks in her brain, but it's too late. Arrow heard me loud and clear. His body collides with hers as he tries to get them both down at the same moment a shot rings through the air.

The thing the movies get wrong is the reaction after you hear the shot. Bullets move faster than sound. So I shouldn't

be surprised when they both go down and blood is shed before they can prevent anything. I can't see what's happening, but I know it can't be good. I get word to Havoc while the comms are open.

“Wolverine, get to the rooftop now. Man down.”

I see his bike fly up to the staircase just as another team comes in from the west end of the building. There are so many people out here that we didn't account for. We were expecting a ten to twenty-man assault, but there are easily forty men here. And those are just the ones we can see.

We still can't get word to Evie as a team approaches the bunker. They won't be able to get in, but Evie and Damien are now just sitting ducks, unable to move. We need a new plan, we need...

I look over to Boris. By the time we make eye contact, he already knows my plan. He reaches out to click the button to speak over all the comms when Lev comes through our earpieces.

“There's a team at the base of your tower.”

My skin goes cold. We may have the upper ground, but if they get in here, there's not much we can do. I strap two rounds of ammo to my chest and fold my brass knuckles over my hands. This might be the moment I need to run. Boris grabs two grenades from under the desk. Opening the window, he tosses one down and the men below scatter.

The explosion goes off, and we look down to see only half of the men get back up. But half is still too many. Boris readies himself to throw the other when one of the men blows open the door to the tower.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I get my new gun out from the holster and take aim at the door. Boris stands in front of me like a human shield and I walk around to his side.

“Together?”

His jaw clenches, and his fingers turn white from where they grip his pistol.

“Together.” His voice is tight and strained.

I have no idea what this moment means to him, but ghosts seem to dance behind his eyes. I lower my gun for a brief second to plant a kiss to his cheek. I don't question it. I plan to fake die here anyway. But he seems like he's about to fall apart, and I figure we could both use a distraction while the enemy climbs to us.

His shoulders relax at the same moment my lips brush the salt-and-pepper stubble on his face. His grip loosens to allow blood flow to his fingertips and I pull back. Footsteps sound directly below and we ready ourselves.

Panic seizes my heart as Boris gets off the first shot. The man in the door goes down instantly and the one behind him goes down from my bullet. Two more are down before they can so much as get three feet into the room. The others seem to think it's a better idea to run.

Boris shoves the dead bodies out of the way while shutting the door and locking it. He grabs the final grenade and we look down to watch as the men exit the building.

However, the moment they are out, more men are approaching. We watch with wide eyes as they set down a package at the base of the tower and every single one of them runs into the west building for cover.

I look at Boris and he shuts the window. Before I can try to take cover his body wraps around mine and folds us under a desk. The air around us seems to vibrate and the building groans. I hold my breath and clench my eyes when the feeling of falling overtakes me. My stomach bottoms out and I vow if we make it out of this alive that I will never go on another roller coaster again.

The last thing I feel before pain shoots through my body is Boris scrambling to hold me tight to him, as if he alone could protect me.



Chapter 58

I watch in horror as the tower across the runway from me falls. Smoke is in the air, fire already blossoming around the scraps that are left of the walls. My fingers are flying over the keys, doing everything I can to re-open communications.

When the action started, I was talking to Evie and Damien as we were setting up. Damien mentioned Evie being off but didn't know what to do about it. We both just figured it was about the events to come and tried to give her space to process. But as this night that was supposed to be our victory takes a turn for the worse, I can't help but wonder if she knows something.

I can't communicate to anyone and I only have brief moments where I can get the cameras up. The only thing I can think is that the men out there are wearing frequency jammers,

which would explain why everything started off fine. It also explains why I can randomly get through to some people but not others.

Did she know? Did she tell him? I can't help but let that small inkling of doubt unfold in my mind until the speakers finally light up.

"Lev, Lev, Ghost."

Evie is screaming, frantic, and just the sound of panic in her voice assures me this isn't her. But who was it?

"I'm here, Lucky Charm, I'm here."

"What's going on?" Damien asks.

"He knew. The fucker knew we were planning this."

I fill them in on where everyone is and what I've seen happen. I can't get Alexi's comms to go through, but I can see him on the cameras.

"Little Shadow, what's going on?" Damien says. "She's freaking out dude, I don't know what to do. She never panics like this."

"I'm right here, I'm just trying to think. This doesn't make sense." Her attitude is fierce, but I know it's because she's scared.

A loud crash sounds through the speakers, sounding like the building is about to fall down around them. I look up to see Laney standing on the edge of the roof launching explosive arrows on the team that's surrounding the bunker.

"It's Laney," I tell them. "She's clearing a way for you guys."

I don't dare tell them that I saw Arrow go down or that I don't know if Havoc made it in time.

"Alexi went into the building. I can see him taking fire on the east end. If Laney opens a window for you, Alexi needs you."

Silence greets me on the comms. I decide to say fuck it with the surveillance and go out there to fight along with them, but

Evie stops me in my tracks.

“I love you,” Evie says, her voice nearly breaking when I open up comms through all of us.

Chaos ensues over the lines. Everyone is talking at once, but my mind only latches onto Evie’s words. That didn’t sound like the girl I’ve come to know. That sounded like goodbye.

“Quiet. Now!” I yell over the line and everyone calms down.

“It’s Damien’s dad. I don’t know how or why, but it was him. I watched him kill my parents.”

Another bout of silence and my heart rips in half, knowing she’s about to do something stupid.

“I love you.” I watch on the computer as her radio signal dies. She turned it off.

“What the fuck?” Damien’s voice rings out.

“Damien?”

Except his follows. When I move to leave the tower, I see six people surrounding it. Loading my gun I get ready, knowing it’s not going to be likely that any of us make it out of this alive. I check the cameras. The only thing working is the bracelets so I do my best to remember everyone’s location.

At least if we die, we all die together.



Chapter 59

I look into her eyes when she says, “It’s Damien’s dad. I don’t know how or why, but it was him. I watched him kill my parents.”

The words don’t register in my head at first. How could it be my father? He didn’t even know her. I shake my head at her, but the look on her face tells me she’s serious. This is real.

“I love you.”

She takes out her earpiece, turns it off and places it in her pocket. Then she hugs me. I wrap my arms around her, not understanding what’s happening.

Before I can register her movements, she has me pinned against the wall, cuffs on my wrists and arms pulled around

the bars in the makeshift cell towards the back.

“What the fuck?” I say, panic setting into me because I know this can’t be good. She takes my earpiece out and turns it off too, then carefully sets it aside.

“They are surrounding us. Alexi is in trouble, and we both heard that explosion. If I stay, we won’t make it. But if I fight and draw them away, my uncle will follow me. They will all follow me. He’s already got to Boris. I’m the only one left that he wants.”

“Don’t,” I beg her as my knees threaten to give out.

This was supposed to be our victory, this was supposed to be her freedom. We were supposed to get happily ever after and make a family. I want the damn white picket fence and puppies.

Why is she doing this?

“I can’t let him take you from this world too.”

Tears stream down her face as she holds both hands on my cheeks. My forehead falls to hers. I want to headbutt her, make her see reason. Threaten to punish her with seven orgasms.

But she pulls back, and I know this story won’t end well. We may all be villains here, but she was my light and my redemption. If she’s gone, then I am nothing but a shell of a man. I am only the monster my father made me.

“Wait,” I say, needing to stall her, needing more information. I could hear the debris falling around us and bombs imploding. Her window to run would be open soon and she’s planning to walk out there to deliver herself to her greatest nightmare.

“Tell me how you know it was him. What did he do?”

She pauses after looking out the small window.

“He shot my father in the head, then he tried to trick my mother into giving me up. He swore he would find me and take me. Then killed her too. Right there in my childhood home. I don’t know how he’s connected to my uncle, but I have a feeling your father was the one to warn him about

today. I need you to find out. Find out what he did and then come save me, okay?"

"Don't do this, baby girl. Stay with me. We will both be safe if we stay here."

She's leaning on the door, her hand poised to turn the handle the second she could. "But they won't be. I told you before, it was all of you or none of you. At the very least, at the end of this, I need to know you have each other."

Then, she pushes the handle and shuts the door behind her. I hear when the keypad, and the lock engages. I let out a roar of anger, frustration, and pure rage because my father was a player in this game. I have never wanted to slit my wrists open and bleed his blood out of me so badly until this very moment.

Trying to focus, I take a deep breath to clear away the growing panic, so I can find a way out to her. To Lev. To Alexi.

Then I remember the tool bag I brought in, sitting just in front of my feet. I reach for it easily with my foot and pull it to the end of the bars where I squat down to rummage through everything.

My little shadow can run, but I will always come for her.



Chapter 60

I wipe away the tears as I run from the bunker. Tears won't help us now. I see Laney above and signal her for smoke bombs as cover, telling her to meet in the east building to help Alexi.

If I can get the team there to see me, then surely they will all move that way. That will keep them away from the towers so that Lev can get responders over there and hopefully save Boris and Nessa. My chest clenches at the thought of losing them, at losing any of them. They have to make it out of here. I have to make sure of it.

If my uncle gets me, he won't kill me. This way everyone will have time to regroup and come up with another plan. One that hopefully involves saving me. I just have to wait him out.

He has too many men and we're only a small team. If I don't act, we are all going to die here.

I make it to my bike just as I hear gunfire. Clicking my skid plates into place, I jump on the bike and rev the engine. The bike takes off like she was made for speed because she was. I go through the grass on the outside of the buildings so that I can get around to the east entrance the quickest.

More gunfire reaches me, so I do the one thing Alexi has been teaching me to do since I got the bike. I shift my weight to the side, careful not to go too fast as I get both legs on one side, keeping the throttle steady.

I slowly place both feet down when I make it to the asphalt and sparks erupt behind me while my bike shields my body from any oncoming bullets. The second I near the entrance, I reposition myself on the bike.

I ride the ramp up into the building and drift around the sharp turn to get through the doors. The past few months of training for hours nearly every day has helped me learn everything I need for this moment.

I abandon my bike as soon as I see the battle waging up ahead. Everyone is hiding behind an object, taking turns firing. It's only when I see Alexi's guns do I move into view, my own gun aimed and ready with a blade in my hand. I toss a smoke grenade to the center of the room and open fire in the haze until I reach Alexi.

Alexi steps back as soon as he sees it's me. His face is furious. "What the fuck are you doing in here?" he yells.

"Coming to save your ass." I step out, making sure the men can see me. One grabs his radio and after he sends his message, I launch my knife right into the base of his trachea. Alexi pulls me back, but I push from his hold and take aim down the hall. I release the blade and take him down with the steel slicing through his neck.

Two more men pop up and Alexi fires, taking one down while I get the other. Thank Hades I was able to learn to be a

decent shot in close range over the past few months. I truly felt bad for the people tasked with reloading our weapons.

Alexi takes out the final two guys, and I turn to him just as Laney approaches from the other end of the building. She has her bow aimed and ready to fire should we encounter any surprises. I turn to Alexi before she gets too close, not wanting her to be able to tell him what I'm up to.

"The tower went down," I tell him, and his eyes go wide. "You need to get to your father. Laney and I will do a sweep for anyone left."

I don't tell him there are at least ten more men out there including my uncle. But I do kiss him, hard.

"I love you. More than anything. Now, go."

"I love you too, Princess." Then, he takes off down the stairs.

Laney approaches from behind a second later.

"I have eyes on her." She looks at me and shakes her head. "What's your plan here girl? Because I have to tell you, the whole sacrificial lamb look isn't a good one on you."

I snort as she puts her bow around her chest and grabs a gun. Her shirt is soaked in blood, and her hands covered, but I don't comment. We need to stay focused. I planned to move north of the building in order to lure everyone away from our people. But just when I go to tell Laney the plan, more gunfire erupts from where she came from.

"Shit, they must have followed me."

"You stay here, I'll go up and around so they don't see me coming."

If we can get the drop on them maybe we have a chance at luring them to a trap and actually make it out of this. I duck behind a dark corner and scan the faces of the men heading towards Laney. *He's not here.* Frustration nags at me. *Where could he be?*

I make my way carefully down the dark hall. I'm almost halfway when a hand wraps around my face. There's a cloth

pressed over my mouth and nose; a strong sweetly acidic smell floods my senses. I try to hold my breath and fight.

My elbow connects with ribs but just as the man doubles over in pain someone punches me in the gut, forcing me to gulp down air through the rag. My vision darkens and my body goes limp even as I try to will it to fight with everything I have.

But it's not enough and just before the world disappears, I hear him.

“You thought you could trick me, Little Warrior? They are all going to pay for what you did.”



Chapter 61

I rush Arrow to the ambulance we have ready in case of traumas. He's bleeding heavily and his body is already weak, but I'm able to get him there thrown over my shoulder.

Doc meets me at the doors as I lay him out on the stretcher. Arrow yells and grabs for his shoulder. Laney wrapped a tourniquet around it, but it's no longer stable after my jog here. Doc readjusts it as Arrow looks at me.

"Look after her. Keep her safe. She needs you." I know why he's saying it, but I can't acknowledge it.

He has to make it. He's a stubborn fucking asshole, but he has to make it. For her. For *me*.

"We both know that girl is too much for only one of us to handle. You've got to make it through, brother. *We* need you."

Admitting that I need him as well feels pretty fucking weak on my part, but it's true. The past month spent with them has been some of the best days of my life. They make every day better, worth living. Arrow knows how to make Laney happy when I can't. He gives her what she needs while making me feel necessary for her too. There just isn't a world that we are meant to be in that doesn't involve her falling asleep between the both of us at night. I simply won't accept it.

"I need you too," he says as his eyes start to get heavy. "Both of you."

"I'm taking him to the hospital. He needs surgery." Doc gives me a look, asking if I want to go with or stay.

As much as I want to go with, I know I need to get back to Laney. She got it together for Evie, but if shit keeps going south, the gods themselves don't even know what that man will do.

I lean over Arrow to kiss him on the head. I don't question my actions because I'm not sure what they really mean.

My chest hurts as I pull back. He looks passed the fuck out. His skin is starting to turn gray. I turn away and get out of the van so they can get moving. I've seen my fair share of death and that looked all too close.

As I run back, the comms finally connect for me. "Havoc, get to Laney. She's in the east wing."

My fists clench as I run to my girl, my unicorn. Adrik was once my best friend and I hate him for what he did to Evie, but if he takes my girl from me, I will tear him limb from fucking limb. Consequences be damned.



Chapter 62

Evie eases into the dark hallway in an attempt to get the team from the back, but after a minute passes, I don't see her. They are getting closer and closer, but there's still no sign of Evie. My mind tries to turn its attention back to Arrow lying bloody on the rooftop as I wrapped the tourniquet around his arm. His screams—they were worse than anything I've ever heard.

Havoc was able to carry him. There was nothing more I could do and Evie needed me. I shake my head, peering back out. Still no Evie.

Come on, girl. I can't take them all.

Their footsteps get louder as I tuck myself back, my hand grips the handle of one of the supply closets. Smoke starts coming from my left where the team is approaching. Except,

instead of burning wood or plastic, the aroma smells oddly sweet.

Oh, shiitake. Knockout gas.

I grab the handle and push it down. It doesn't budge. I turn fully and jerk it, willing it to open. My hands are shaking as I hold my breath, but I can already feel the effects hitting me. My movements are slow, but the door finally budes. I push in just in time to fall to the floor as the door swings shut behind me. I engage the lock just as my vision starts to fog.

I'm praying Evie locked herself in a closet and that's why I didn't see her. Any other alternative is too much to handle at the moment.

"I'm coming for you, baby," I hear in my ear, but the fog is growing. I try to get the words out with a tongue that feels swollen and too big for my mouth. We stashed masks in the plane just outside this terminal for this reason. If he knows, he can grab one.

With all of the energy I have left, I warn him.

"Knock. Out. Gas." My voice is raspy. I'm not even sure if he can hear it. The faint yell of a voice comes, but I don't know what they're saying. I don't even know whose voice it is.

Then, my world goes dark.



Chapter 63

The team outside is taking fire from Alexi. I saw Evie go in to help him, but the comms are all over the place. Almost all of the men are down as I scan for signs of movement. There's a strange feeling nagging at me that I just can't seem to shake so I check the cameras where I last saw Evie one more time.

Everything goes cold when I see it. Three men exit the east building with a limp Evie in their arms. My nerves all burn with a fire I'm not used to feeling.

What the fuck?

I grab my gun decide fuck it, this is not going to happen. My feet hit the stairs, going faster than should even be possible, but I can't stop. I won't.

I make it to the final step and open the door. I fire on the last two men standing. They go down before they can even register that I'm behind them. Alexi comes out from behind the ATV he was using for cover as I start yelling.

“They have her! Get to the cars, your bike, anything!”

The tires in the ATV are shot through and as I make it to my bike, I find those tires shredded as well. Damien comes running around the corner.

“Where's the car? Your bikes?”

“They destroyed them, man. They took heavy fire and cut through all the tires. Where is she?”

The anxiety in his gaze only intensifies. “Find a fucking vehicle! They took her!”

I point to a black jeep that is taking off down the runway. The tower to the right starts smoking more, but I can hear yelling inside. Alexi looks torn.

“Go to your dad, I'll call for a car.”

Havoc races into the building ahead and reappears in a gas mask with Laney in his arms. They must have knocked them out. He spots us and runs over.

“Arrow was taken to the hospital. Doc is sending another ambulance for Boris and Nessa. Where is E?”

“Do you know where a car is without the tires slashed? Does your bike work?”

He shakes his head, and I lose every strand of control I've ever had. I take off running back up the tower to watch where the vehicle goes as I call the men who should be closest to us.

“Hey, boss. What's up?”

“Get to the airport, armored cars, five minutes.”

I hang up, knowing they will listen to me. I catch the black vehicle heading south on the main highway and pull up traffic cams on my tablet as I run back down the stairs.

They cannot have her.

“I need help,” Alexi yells when I come out of the tower door, getting a glimpse of where the jeep is heading. When I hear a sharp cry of pain, I set the computer down on the destroyed car by the tower and run to Alexi.



Chapter 64

As the building crumbles around us, all I can think about is shielding her, protecting her. My arms are tight around her but we are thrown back by the force of the collapse. The building seems to roll out from under us and her body separates from mine. My eyes struggle to adjust to the dark area. And when they finally focus, I see her impaled on a tall piece of rebar.

I run to her, my heart in my throat as I assess the damage. Her skin is pale, but she still has a pulse. Blood trickles down her face from a small cut on her head. Other than that, she seems okay. Well, as okay as you can be impaled through your abdomen with iron.

“Ness, Ness. Come on Lisichka, look at me.”

Her eyes flutter open at my words as she takes in the damage. She gasps, sobs racking her body and I can see the

moment she accepts death.

“Get out of here, Boris. Get to Alexi.” She’s shaking uncontrollably. I suddenly remember the equipment stored here in case of an emergency.

Bolt cutters were in the bag in case the doors jammed and locked. I run to where I saw that part of the building fall and rummage through the items. Smoke is clouding the air so I wrap my shirt around my face to help filter the debris.

She cannot die, no one else can die.

I find the bolt cutters and run back to her.

“It’s not fair,” she says, seeming to be in a daze. “I lived my whole life for my father. I did everything he wanted. And he abandoned me at the first sign of weakness.”

She shudders, her voice growing softer with each breath. And if there’s one thing I’ve come to know about this woman, it’s that she is not soft. “I was planning to start living my life for me after this. Make my own way, my own choices. I was never going to go back to Ireland.”

Her body relaxes, and she seems to pass out. I take this as the time to cut the bar above her, careful not to let it fall on her. I leave a few inches though, just to make sure it doesn’t accidentally dislodge. I do not know a lot about emergency medicine, but I do know not to remove an object that is impaled, especially this close to her spleen and kidney.

I move her slightly to cut the bar below her, causing her to groan. Sweat coats her entire body, from the heat of the flames inching closer and likely from the shock as well. I’m able to cut the bar under her, but I can’t lie her flat on her back. Instead, I prop her on her side using some fallen debris to keep her upright.

I look for a way out, a thinning in the debris. The smoke is all rushing to one area and I run to it while yelling, hoping like hell some of the kids made it out of this and can get here. I hear a response but I’m unable to tell who it is. I keep yelling until I hear sirens. Alexi’s face comes to life in the darkness before me.

I grab his arm and pull him in. “Help me get her. I need to save her.”

My voice is a desperate croak, but I don’t quite care right now. Nessa is lying there still as ice. Alexi goes to her and checks her pulse. I force myself to watch, to know.

“She’s got a strong pulse still. This bar is likely holding everything in place. Can you help me move her?”

I look down at my shaking hands and remember her calling me an old man. I am not fucking old.

“I got her, just clear the way.” I carefully scoop her into my arms while Alexi helps me maneuver out of the debris.

An ambulance approaches as soon as I step out, another close behind it. I look around to see Laney in Havoc’s arms. Lev and Damien look broken and Alexi is pacing furiously.

“Where is Evie?” I ask them.

“They took her, a car will be here any minute. We are getting her back.”

Alexi storms past me, pulling his phone out of his pocket and barking orders. It reminds me so much of me. I get Nessa into the back of the truck. As people look her over I go to my son and I pull him into a hug. He freezes at first, but I know he needs this from me. I need it too after everything that just happened.

“You need to be careful. If you go after her now it could be a trap.” I can’t tell him not to go, but as his father, I need to say something.

“Go with Nessa. We will figure this out. Havoc will take Laney in the next ambulance. You keep each other safe here. We are going to get our girl.”

I know there’s no point in arguing. If he dies on this mission, I have to accept that he makes his own choices. I let him go and he claps me on the shoulder, squeezing.

“I love you, Father.”

He turns and walks away as I whisper, “I love you too, son.”

I get into the back of the vehicle with Nessa to find her looking even worse than before.

“We need to get her to surgery, fast.”

The hospital is only a few minutes away. I have to hope we can make it. I don't know what's wrong with Laney or where Arrow was after the sniper got off a shot, but we can't be down half our team in this. I've never lost like this before. Never.

I think about who could have done this, who would have known how to go after all of us here and warn Adrik. I think I have an idea, but I need to find some proof.

Just as I start to think about how to hunt the person responsible, an explosion unlike anything I've ever felt before ripples over the ground and fear grips me even more. He already took the girl I swore to protect. If he takes my son too, there will be no place he can hide that I won't find him.

Even a Shade has to step out of the dark sometime. The moment he does, I'll be waiting for him.



Chapter 65

My head keeps falling forward and it hurts to pick it up. I know this position all too well though. My ankles and legs are strapped to the chair and my hands are zip-tied behind me. I don't want to move because if I do, they will know I'm awake. And I have no idea what I'm in for.

I was planning on sacrificing myself, sure, but I had thought I'd maybe be awake during the escape, so I could somehow slit my uncle's throat in the process. None of this went to plan. I have no idea if The Society will even want me now that I screwed up this bad.

Will the guys be coming for me? Did they make it out okay? Are they together?

The lights flicker on above and *he* walks into the room. I want to spit in his face, and I would if I wasn't currently

gagged. That's probably why he did it. He knows just how feisty I can be. He trained me in the beginning after all.

“Well, well, well. Look who's awake for us. Are you finally ready to break for me?”

Us?

I shake my head, not wanting to acknowledge that he's brought me here. I know this room, I know these tools. He might want me alive, but he doesn't want me whole. He wants to break me. He wants me to blindly follow orders out of fear of what he might do.

“It really was a fun game to play for the past eleven years. Building you up just to ruin you. Figuring out just how much you could take before you broke. I always swore to myself that one day, I would find a way to shatter you the same way your father shattered me. He turned his back on me. And so did Boris when he stole my fiancé.”

He walks over to the table, calm and calculating.

“Do you know the best way to keep a prisoner from escaping, *Evie?*” He spits my fake name at me like it is rot in his mouth. “You never let them realize they're in prison,” he answers for himself, not caring if I wanted to know the answer to the question.

“I helped kill your parents, then I took you. I pretended to protect you while manipulating you. I taught you to fight, but only for the causes I let you see. I kept you here, fighting my war for *me*. By just pretending to care for you. And you stayed—without me even having to ask.”

He laughs then. Like he's sharing a joke he'd been holding onto for years. He laughs until tears stream down his face. Then, he looks at me with nothing but disdain in his eyes.

“But you were always soft. You could only take hits that had a good reason. You wanted pathetic, emotional women in my organization. Then you fell for the guys the second they gave you attention. Like the stupid whore you are.”

He grabs a hammer from his table of toys, a tool only a man throwing a fit would use. *And he says women are emotional?*

Anyone with a brain would go for the pliers. Those would keep your target in pain for much longer with less chance of accidentally causing a fatal injury. Not to mention, their damage can be permanent without being fatal.

Reaching out, he cuts the bindings of one of my hands from behind me and forces it to lay flat on the table, then he strikes. One by one, breaking my fingers.

The ring I accepted from Alexi hangs around my neck. I didn't want anyone to see it until this was all over. I'm thankful now, with it being hidden, my uncle doesn't have any more ammunition he can use to break me.

The pain is like lightning shooting through my body, hitting every nerve ending, even ones I didn't know I had. It isn't until the third finger that I make a sound. Something between a whine and a hiccup.

Focus. Breathe in your nose and out of your mouth. He doesn't deserve your screams.

He gnashes his teeth at me like an animal when he doesn't get the reaction he wants from me on the fifth finger.

"You will break, Little Warrior," he says under his breath. "Mark my words." He throws the hammer back on the table and exits the room, leaving me alone to process what he just said. I knew he was a liar, but I didn't know just how deep that went until now. Everything we found out when I woke up in that hospital bed killed me more and more.

But I think part of me still thought there was a small space in that man's heart for me, even if it was messed up. I think back on my life with him and reflect on what he just said. It was all a game.

Every time something good began to happen, there was always a moment when the world seemed to push back and tell me no. Except, now I'm realizing that it wasn't the world that said no. It was him.

When I wanted to stay and train at age thirteen, he made me think he would help me do whatever I wanted. Then, I 'found' letters my mom had written about her dream for me to go to

university. Adrik pushed for me to finish grade school, so I could fulfill that dream for her one day.

When I began taking down my opponents in the ring, finally starting to feel in control and powerful, that's when they came to rape me.

Then, I started the training for the women's program. And when it was going so well, I was needed elsewhere.

Or when I was seeing the guys in a new light, he made Laney share the video. All so I would believe I could only trust one person.

The final straw was when I wanted to bring the guys into the plan, and he left me no other choices. That's when he sent a team after me, to beat me and make me think it was the guys trying to kill me.

Every time I felt powerful or happy, he found a way to strip it from me. Just so that I remained reliant on him and him alone. I was his to manipulate. I was his to control. And I obeyed, like a fucking puppet, having no idea I was even tied to strings.

I internally punch myself for not seeing it all before. *How did I not catch this?*

You were always soft. Stupid whore.

It's all clear to me now. He didn't bring me here to kill me. He needs me here to break me so that he doesn't feel like a failure. When he walks back into the room, he steps to the side and a tall man with light brown hair walks in.

His face comes into view, and I feel a burning in my chest. He's the one; he killed them.

"It has been such a charade keeping you from seeing me for a while now, Miss Eydis. I am so glad to finally get to meet you." He walks up to me, a grin splitting his face from ear to ear. "I am Rostya, Damien's father."

I can't speak so I just stare. I look into the eyes of the man who made me an orphan when he took my parents from me. I search for any ounce of remorse in his bones.

Not only do I find none, but what I do see is as awful as they come. The set to his jaw, his posture, the way he pretends to own the whole fucking room when in reality the man is a cockroach.

“I think she has something to say, Adrik.”

He gestures to my uncle and I play along. He steps up to move the gag from my mouth and the second it's out and his fingers are still close, I bite down as hard as I can.

“Motherfucker!” he yells in pain. Blood coats my tongue, but the man would have to pry my mouth open with pliers if he thinks he's getting his finger back. I crush down, breaking through bone and making sure to shatter every piece that's in my mouth.

I spit it out on the floor as he screams louder. When Rostya comes close, I gather the spit and blood in my mouth and launch it into his face, blood spattering down his white collar.

His nostrils flare, and before I can register it, my head is being slapped to the side so hard I nearly black out. I blink away the darkness and focus on him again, raising my chin as if to ask for more. He can hit me all he likes, they clearly need me alive for whatever they have planned.

Another smack, and then my uncle joins in. They beat me as I sit helpless in the chair, and my broken mangled hand falls to the side. I tense my muscles, doing everything I can to protect my organs, but after a minute, blood coats my tongue and I know this time it's my own.

“That's enough,” my uncle barks, likely saving me from organ damage at this point. “We brought a present for you.”

He moves to the table and wraps some gauze around his middle finger. I only got the top third of it, but I know it had to hurt like a bitch. Small victories are everything in war, after all. I look at Damien's dad, seeing the monster he really is.

“Why did you kill them?” It's the question I've wanted to ask for years.

“Your parents?” He chuckles a demonic sound. “They wouldn't give you to me you. I needed you, needed to break

you, to break them all. I thought killing his wife would be enough. But no, Boris still pushed through. It was a real tragedy that my wife and Ivan's died in that accident as well, but all things happen for a reason." He walks to the table of tools, examining them.

"I planned to break you and then send you back to Boris as a spy. Get you to kill Alexi for me. When that didn't work, I tried to have Alexi killed on the island and we planned to frame you. I wanted to set up a beautiful scene of a double murder with you and Boris, so that I could finally take control of the Bratva."

He walks to Adrik's side then. My heart threatens to explode in my chest as all of these revelations come to light.

"This was all so we could take over. Adrik here has been working for years to infiltrate mafia and criminal organizations all over the world. We have spies in nearly half of them just waiting on the word. You, my dear, were our ticket to the largest mafia ring known to man. We saved you, groomed you, and then you went and ran away."

He shakes his finger at me as if I'm a petulant child and walks over to the television screen on the wall. I know these rooms now that I've had time to take in my surroundings. We are in the underground bunker just outside of Siberia, near the mountains.

Shit, we are underground. I move my wrist, my tracking bracelet still intact. I need to get above ground so it works. But there is one question that's been nagging at me since Havoc came to the island.

"Why did you make me lose the challenge?" I ask my uncle. He looks at me with a sneer on his face, but ever the lover of the sound of his own voice, he answers.

"A woman is not meant to rule over men. Plus, those men never would have taken kindly to you being over them. You could never have formed an alliance or gotten close. Because they would have known being below you was not their place. You needed to be *humbled*."

My jaw drops at his admission. The same words his Shades had spoken to me about women in the organization running through my head. They didn't believe those things on their own, he taught it to them. He's the real misogynistic asshole behind everything.

"We found the tracker in your pocket," Rostya says as he grabs a remote. "Not to mention, we also found *them*."

A screen lights up and three rooms come into view. Three rooms and three faces I'd know anywhere. Three sets of eyes that stare right into the camera, straight through my soul. I want to cry out, to scream, as panic like I've never known grips my heart. But I won't give them the satisfaction. I can't. There has to be a way out of this.

Alexi is tied to a cross, lashes marring his broken and bloody body. Lev is floating in water, a tether tied to his leg that has a lever on it, slowly pulling him under while his hands are tied behind his back.

Damien is in a cage, metal bars lining the walls and electrodes falling from the ceiling, zapping him anytime he so much as breathes. These aren't just torture rooms, they're kill rooms. Rostya laughs as he watches his son squirm in agony.

"They thought they could come save you. They thought we weren't leading them right into another trap. It was childish, really."

Adrik comes to my side, his face dangerously close to mine as he whispers, "This is what happens when you bring home pets, Little Warrior. You will learn that I'm the only one on earth you will follow, or everyone you come to care for will die at your feet by my hands."

For a moment, I have hope. Hope that somehow Boris will find us and save us. Hope that Laney will be able to hack into the systems in the bunker. Hope that we can all make it out of here alive.

I know my uncle can smell it—the hope. He takes a deep breath and wrenches my hair back to look at the screen, then grabs a radio and calls out, "Kill them."

I try to turn away like a coward; I do everything I can not to look when Alexi's screams pierce the air. Adrik pries my eyes open with his fingers.

"You will watch because this is your fault. This is what happens when people love you. They *die*."

The sounds coming from Alexi's mouth don't even sound human, just pure agony in all senses of the word. They cut his bindings and he falls to his knees. His beautiful blue eyes look up at the camera at the same moment a knife is plunged into his side, and I scream.

I scream for him, for the injustice, for me and my life. I scream as I watch blood pool around him. I scream as I see them pull Lev under, his white hair floating around as he wiggles and tries with all his might to get in a breath. All too soon, his lungs are filled with water and the light leaves him. And another piece of my heart leaves this world.

Rostya has the audacity to cover his ears over the noise . A look of pause crosses his features before he gives Adrik a nod.

Then, I scream again for Damien as they turn up the voltage and every muscle on his body seems to go tight. He seizes within the sea of electrodes and falls to the ground convulsing until there is nothing left.

Nothing left of them and nothing left of me. Then, there is only silence.

"I told you," Adrik says as Rostya smiles at the screen, "I would break you."

My chest heaves. I don't think I can take another breath. Without them in this world, my lungs have no reason to keep breathing. There is no reason to keep pushing through the pain. There is no reason to live. Everyone I ever loved is gone, there is nothing worth fighting for anymore.

As my body forces me to inhale a breath, I decide I'm done. I'm done fighting, done hoping. I am done with life itself.

I didn't break after my parents were murdered in cold blood while I watched. I didn't break when I was beaten and starved. Not when I was brutally raped and tortured. Even when I was

bullied and believed that the men I cared for had turned their backs on me. I didn't fucking break when I found out the only man that I trusted for eleven years, my own blood, was the one who betrayed me.

But the moment I finally accepted these men into my heart, allowed them to see the deepest, darkest depths of my soul, I said I would break for them. I said I would die for them.

As I watched them take their final breaths, everything I have inside of me begins to shatter into thousands of pieces. The things I never thought possible until I found them—every thought, every connection, every feeling I believed I was never capable of having is fractured beyond repair.

Their deaths may have broken me, but before I give up I will fight one last fight just for them. The men I loved.

I will have their revenge.



Epilogue

I sit in the hospital waiting area, right outside the OR waiting to hear news on Nessa and Arrow. My phone hasn't rung with an update from the boys and my nerves are on edge. I begin barking orders at my men in the room, needing a space set up that I can use as an office.

People begin to scramble. I have security posted on all doors and Doc supervising all surgeries ensuring no ill intent to my people. Laney is already in a room slowly recovering from the knockout gas and a shoulder injury she likely didn't even realize she had. Havoc is with her and hasn't left her side. After our time together, I trust him completely.

I've called her parents and updated them and as soon as she is better, I will have a car ready to take her to them. We agreed

it wasn't safe for them to come here right now. Not until we knew what the boys had done with Evie and Adrik.

The news on the television above flashes with reports of an explosion at an airport. I look at the screen to see destruction all over. Reports of bodies are coming up and all I can think about is my son.

I finally got a computer and I found the files of the security footage of the property. I comb through it as quickly as I can until my eyes are red from exhaustion. I don't hear it when the doctor approaches behind me.

"They should both pull through. The girl is recovering in room one and the man in room two. She's already awake and asking for you."

The doctor is young and followed closely by Doc, so I know I have nothing to worry about. Doc is one of my oldest friends and trusted more than anyone close to me. I never would have let my son and his friends attend if I wasn't allowed to plant my own people there to keep them safe.

I nod at him in dismissal, combing through the footage one last time, and that's when I see it. My hands shake as anger washes over me, but Nessa needs me. I shut the laptop and bring it with me to her room.

"Is everyone okay?" she asks immediately. I shake my head and tears come to her eyes. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

She's hyperventilating, panic setting in and after everything she's been through. It's not fair for her to feel this right now with the pain so clearly written on her face.

I send Doc a text. Less than a minute later, a nurse comes in with medication that will keep her relaxed and out of pain. I go to her side and hold her hand, feeling so small in mine. She's so young and fierce, but tender and kind. Nessa cares with a heart of fire, and I find I don't want to leave her side no matter how much I should be doing right now.

As she doses off to sleep, I keep one hand interlocked with hers while I use the other on my laptop propped on her bed.

That way I never have to take my eyes off of her. Then, I get to work, planning our next moves carefully.

This time, he won't see us coming.

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small way. I hope I have brought that to you. I hope you know that you are all accepted, loved, and appreciated by me.

And finally, my readers. You guys are all incredible. I can't believe people are actually reading my book and liking it! I hope these words and characters find a way to bring you strength and encouragement when you need it. We all may fail, but as sweet baby Lev told us, it's about what you do with that failure that makes you who you are. So, be great. I believe in you!

Playlist

Slayer- Bryce Savage

Monsters in My Mind- Cloudy Jane

Monster- Fight the Fade

Heavier- Rain City Drive

ECHO- STARSET

You've Created A Monster- Bohnes

Die Trying- New Medicine

Vicious- Bohnes

Let It Go- Chandler Leighton and Lo Spirit

IN THREES- AS IT IS, Set It Off, JordyPurp

Blvck- Bryce Savage

Therapy- VIOLA

SELF LOVE- Samantha Leah

Cutting It Close- Rain City Drive

Easy to Love- Bryce Savage

Karma- Letdown.

Devil- LOWBORN

Demon- Savage Hands

Damn!- Jeris Johnson, Ricky Desktop

The Devil Wears Lace- Steven Rodriguez

Paint The Town Red- Doja Cat

Running with Scissors- I See Stars